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INTERZONE

ISSUE 199

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

exclusive interview

THE YEAR OF STROSS

Charles Stross talks to us about space opera, posthuman intelligence and habitable futures

the best new stories

GARP AND GERONAMID
NEAL ASHER

plus:

STEVEN MOHAN, JR
JAY CASELBERG
JEREMIAH TOLBERT
NINA ALLAN

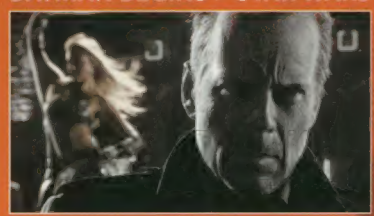
book & film reviews

JOHN CLUTE
NICK LOWE
& others

art & illustrations

JIM BURNS
& others

MUTANT POPCORN: SIN CITY > BATMAN BEGINS > STAR WARS



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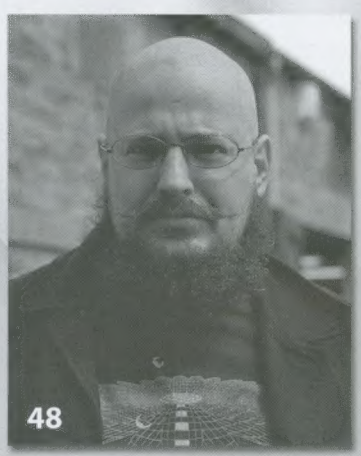


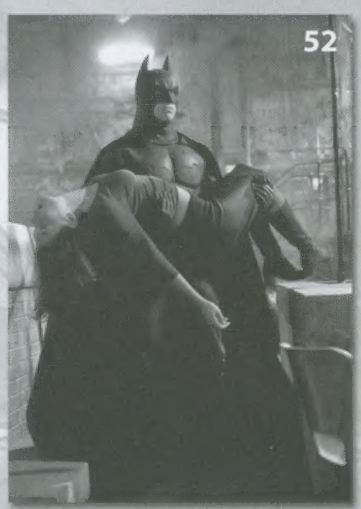
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JULY+AUGUST 2005
INTERZONE 199







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"I'm an intellectual flea: I bounce around all over the place and my bite isn't usually very deep. But I like to think breadth of coverage is more important than depth. I'm trying to paint on a broad canvas in lots of pretty colours to keep the readers entertained. Sometimes I do try to go deep, but please don't make the mistake of trying to take me too seriously"

COVER ART

JIM BURNS
'THRELXEPIA'S LITTLE SISTER'
MORE DETAILS IN INTERFACE



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INTERFACE

Welcome to IZ199. You will already have noticed the new look to the cover. This came about following reader feedback and a conversation with the Circulation Manager of a relatively large publisher/distributor, during which he pointed out exactly what we were doing wrong! One of the ways we hope to take *Interzone* forward – particularly after seeing comments on the website forum from some readers, or rather potential readers, unable to find the magazine in certain shops – is to make it more widely available both here in the UK and overseas, and the first step towards this goal is to have a masthead that, and I quote, "Screams out at you!" I hope this first step is one in the right direction, along with the slight enhancements throughout the magazine, all of which are gearing up towards the milestone issue 200, every single page of which will be printed in colour. For now, you must still *imagine* each shade of grey (for example, in the section headings) as its own individual colour.

More on IZ200 below, but now back to this issue's cover, and our thanks to Jim Burns, one of the world's leading science fiction and fantasy artists, for supplying the cover art. This particular piece – 'Threlxepia's Little Sister' – also appears, in a slightly different form, on the cover of Jim's forthcoming book *Imago*, available from Titan soon, which "showcases the sensual exploration of women trapped in their alien environments." As well as all the high class finished paintings, the book features many previously unseen sketches allowing you to follow the creative journey to its completion. I've been lucky enough to see an advance copy of this book, and have no hesitation in recommending it to you.

You might well be reading this at Worldcon, and you might even be reading this after Jim Burns has picked up a Hugo Award for Best Artist. I think we've mentioned enough *Interzone*'s shortlisting in the Best Semiprozine category, along side *Interzone*'s new sister magazine *The 3rd Alternative . . .*

Which after the current issue (TTA42) will be known as *Black Static*. I don't really want to take up IZ space talking about other magazines, but since one of the first things you see here is the yellow form detailing the publisher's other stuff, and since quite a lot of you are TTA readers anyway, I should briefly explain what's going on.

It's essentially the same magazine, but this title change is the last step in a process that began with the arrival in this stable of *Interzone* (a year ago now!), which has enabled TTA to stop competing with IZ for science fiction and fantasy content and concentrate more on its darker side. Nothing fundamental has changed, we're just able to more successfully cover the waterfront now, particularly if you add in our third fiction magazine *Crimewave*. (The new issue, *Crimewave 8: Cold Harbours*, will be out by, and on sale at, Worldcon.)

I believe this also makes a subscription to more than just *Interzone* even greater value for money, and to emphasise this we've introduced a new 'dual subscription' for *Interzone* and what is now *Black Static*.

If there's anything else we could or should do, please don't hesitate to give us your suggestion, either direct (here at Worldcon?) or via the interactive discussion forum on the website. I'm sure I've said this before, but I think it's worth saying again: we want to involve you as much as possible in your magazine.

Andy Cox

NEXT ISSUE > INTERZONE 200

Don't miss this milestone issue, the first IZ to be published in full colour throughout



Just one of the many illustrations by Glitchwerk for Saving Mars

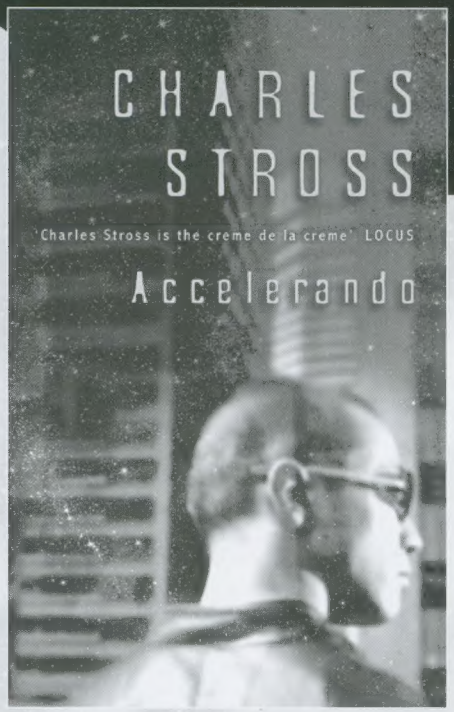
Saving Mars by Jason Stoddard > the sequel to Winning Mars (IZ196) illustrations and cover art by Josh Finney and Kat Rocha of Glitchwerk

We have some well known names but we're also looking to the future with some of the New Interzone Generation. Alongside Jason Stoddard: Will McIntosh, Dave Hoing, Elizabeth Bear, David Mace, Jessica Reisman...

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER ISSUE, ON SALE IN SEPTEMBER > SUBSCRIBE NOW!

BACK ISSUES > CHECK OUR WEBSITE FOR AVAILABILITY AND ORDERING

COMPETITIONS



WIN!

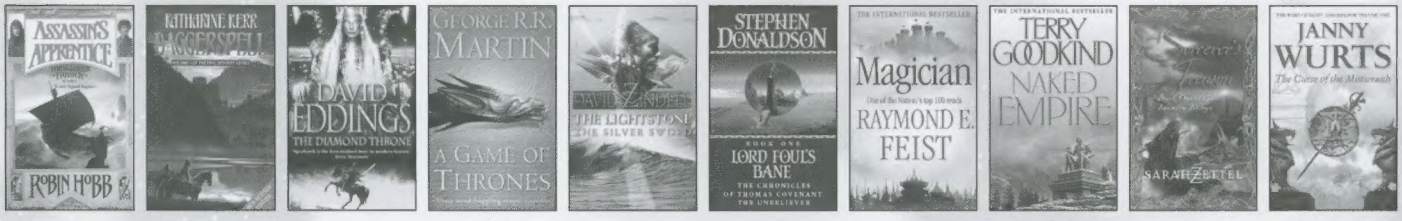
Courtesy of Orbit we have five copies of Charles Stross's new novel *Accelerando* to give away. Simply write your answer to the following question on a postcard or pop it in an envelope and send it to the *Interzone* address, marked 'Accelerando'.

In *Iron Sunrise*, what is the name of the performance artist on a quest for the throne of Scotland?

Charles Stross is interviewed on page 48

CELEBRATING VOYAGER'S 10TH BIRTHDAY

Voyager, one of the UK's leading Fantasy publishers, is celebrating its 10th birthday this year



Voyager will be celebrating its ten years at the top with a major presence at Worldcon in Glasgow. International bestselling author Robin Hobb will be there to launch her new novel *Shaman's Crossing*; George R.R. Martin will appear at the convention ahead of the long-awaited release of *A Feast For Crows* (September); Kim Stanley Robinson and Greg Bear will also be in attendance, as will Voyager publishing director Jane Johnson.

We have teamed up with Voyager to offer ten lucky readers a package containing the publisher's Top Ten Fantasy paperback novels. Simply write the answer to the following question on a postcard or pop it in an envelope and send it to the *Interzone* address, marked 'Voyager':

What is the name of Voyager's publishing director?

WIN!

1. Assassin's Apprentice by Robin Hobb
2. Game of Thrones by George R.R. Martin
3. Magician by Raymond E. Feist
4. DaggerSpell by Katharine Kerr
5. The Diamond Throne by David Eddings
6. The Lightstone by David Zindell
7. Sorcerer's Treason by Sarah Zettel
8. Lord Foul's Bane by Stephen Donaldson
9. Curse of the Mistwraith by Janny Wurts
10. Naked Empire by Terry Goodkind

CLARKE AWARD

Once again the presentation was surrounded with controversy, since money was desperately tight this year and SF notables who'd been expecting free drinks were confronted with the stark horror of a cash bar. Otherwise the mood was sunny as China Miéville accepted his second Clarke award, and Sir Arthur's £2005 cheque, for *Iron Council*. This at last equals the achievement of Pat 'Two-Clarkes' Cadigan. Even the delighted author was surprised by this result, the general sense having been that if a 'mainstream' contender (*Cloud Atlas* or *The Time Traveller's Wife*) didn't win, the award must surely go to Ian McDonald – also present – for *River of Gods*. But those Clarke judging panels are famously unpredictable. Administrator Paul Kincaid closed the ceremony by saying: 'Let the arguments begin.'





John Betancourt's Wildside Press, formerly a minority owner of *Weird Tales*, has bought the magazine outright from Warren Lapine's DNA Publications. Betancourt joined George Scithers and Darrell Schweitzer as co-editor, restoring what he calls the 'classic editorial lineup' of 1987.

THOG'S BLURB SPECIAL

Found in *Gossamyr* by Michelle Hauf: '"This book kicks butt – in a lush and lyrical way." Susan Sizemore'.

Bloomsbury Auctions sent their latest catalogue of modern firsts. Which genre titles now command four-figure expected prices? Not *The Time Machine*, a mere £600, but: *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The House at Pooh Corner*, *1984*, and *Northern Lights*, each at £1000. All these pale before the glory of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* (1st English, £1500), *Dracula* at £3000, *Farmer Giles of Ham* ditto, and – oh dearie me – a cool £6000 for *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*.

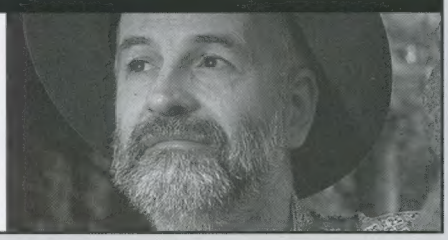
AS OTHERS SEE US

Hal Hartley has made a movie set in the near future, with the US run by a totalitarian corporation and visited by an alien – but of course it's not SF. From an interview: 'But, really, I don't think of *The Girl From Monday* as sci-fi. Not for real. It's more like a song about life now told *as if* it were sci-fi. Sometime copping the postures of a genre can allow you to address a broader range of topics and allow you to be a little more poetic without being too heavy.' No doubt.



AS WE SEE OTHERS

Terry Pratchett muses in *The Times*: 'I think about the literary world like I think about Tibet. It's quite interesting, it's a long way away from me and it's sure as hell they're never going to make me Dalai Lama.'



R.I.P.

John Brosnan (1947–2005), Australian writer, magazine columnist and SF film expert long resident in Britain, was found dead in his flat at Ortygia House, Harrow, on 11 April, after friends were unable to contact him. The cause of death was acute pancreatitis. John wrote five books on genre cinema, many SF adventures, some pseudonymous horror novels (often in collaboration with Leroy Kettle) as 'Harry Adam Knight' and 'Simon Ian Childer', and most of the film entries for the 1979 *Encyclopedia of SF*.

Frank Gorshin (1934–2005), US actor who played the Riddler in the 1960s *Batman* TV series, died on 17 May aged 71.

Josef Nesvadba (1926–2005), psychiatrist and satirical author known as the king of Czech SF, died unexpectedly on 25 April; he was 78.

Samuel H. Post (1924–2005), US editor, publisher and anthologist responsible for many 1960s MacFadden-Bartell SF titles, died on 20 May aged 81.

Margaretta Scott (1912–2005), UK stage and cinema actress who played two parts in the SF classic *Things to Come* (1936, scripted by H.G. Wells), died on 15 April aged 93.

Pat York, US teacher and short-SF author who was a Nebula finalist in 2000, died in a car crash on 21 May; she was 57.



Allan Bryce's publications attracted much attention after accusations of plagiarism on a web discussion board led to the identification of very many reviews, most from horror film websites, allegedly recycled without permission, payment or credit in *The Dark Side* (typically under Bryce's editorial byline) and in *DVD World* (edited by 'Richard Marshall', a known Bryce pseudonym). Evidence is almost surreally plentiful, with more than 100 individual reviews supposedly traced; reported victims include not just genre reviewers but the *New York Times* and the BBC. A *UK Press Gazette* investigation was announced.

MORE AWARDS

Nebula Award for best novel: Lois McMaster Bujold, *Paladin of Souls*.
Sidewise Awards (alternate history): the Long Form shortlist consists of one book, Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (which could, theoretically, lose to No Award), while the six Short Form finalists include a graphic-novel sequence, Warren Ellis's *Ministry of Space*.
Mythopoeic Awards adult fiction shortlists: Kage Baker, *The Anvil of the World*; Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*; Elizabeth Hand, *Mortal Love*; Patricia A. McKillip, *Alphabet of Thorn*; Gene Wolfe, *The Wizard Knight* (*The Knight* and *The Wizard*).

THOG'S MASTERCLASS

Revisionist Paleontology Dept. 'The megatherium, the ichthyosaurus have paced the earth with seven-league steps and hidden the day with cloud fast wings.' (George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*, 1903)
Astronomy/Cosmology Dept. 'If his calculations and instruments were correct, he was now outside the home galaxy of the Milky Way and in an entirely new universe, the universe known to him as the Crab Nebula.'
Dept of Preternatural Rigidity. 'He raged and shouted at them from behind the bars which, as she shook them, held as firm as though a fly's feet were touching them.' (both from David Whitaker, *The Dr Who Annual*, 1965)

John Meaney reports from the heady world of tie-in publicity: 'In that well-known bookshop, F****s, the atmosphere was buzzing in the SF section tonight [8 April], as staff discussed their new promotion strategy. With a screening of *Hitch-Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy* about to occur in London, the opportunities were shimmering: costumes, glamorous hair-dos, and . . . "I know," said one of the booksellers. "We could bring Douglas Adams into the shop." I told her it was an excellent idea, and one that he surely would have approved of.'



Stephen Fry knows that Douglas Adams didn't write that icky SF stuff: 'I'm not a fan of science-fiction but neither was Douglas. He just happened to write a book about space and time. I wouldn't want to mention names but I do think science-fiction writers take themselves far too seriously.' (Ireland OnLine news)



PHOTOS > THANKS TO PAUL KINCAID FOR THE CLARKE AWARDS > BRUNO VINCENT AT ORION FOR TERRY PRATCHETT



DAVID LANGFORD
ANSIBLE LINK

STORIES > THE HOUSE OF THE BEATA VIRGO BY STEVEN MOHAN, JR > ILLUSTRATED BY RIK RAWLING



THE HOUSE OF THE BEATA VIRGO

Steven Mohan, Jr

Why would anyone give up their identity, *their whole life*, just to become a celebrity and a mere *faux* celebrity at that? Well, there are a thousand desperate reasons and a thousand desperate stories, but no one wants to hear them.

In America, all we want is the stories we already know.

Which is why I ended up in Vegas, standing in the office of a man I'd never met, wearing formfitting black pants and a black bodice that pushed up my breasts.

The placard on the man's desk said LAKOTA SPENCER. The desk was polished granite with absolutely nothing on it: no screen, no paperwork, not so much as a paperclip to mar its perfect flatness.

When Mr Spencer finally walked in, he wasn't what I expected: slim, an inch shorter than six feet, tanned, physique shaped by Nautilus four times a week. He wore a headset with the thin mike perched stylishly before his full lips. His eyes were an unlikely Pacific blue.

He looked at me as he came around the desk and sat down, his eyes picking out critical details: my white-blonde hair, the curve of my neck, the swell of my breasts, my slim, perfect legs. His eyes didn't linger, they were in and out at the speed of information, dancing over me just long enough to tell him exactly what I was.

Whatever else Lakota Spencer was he didn't sample the product.

He leaned across the desk and shook my hand. "Spencer." I didn't introduce myself and he didn't ask. "Tab," he said.

I handed him the datatab his OB had given me.

He popped it into a handheld and I watched him scroll through the report.

The datatab was one-time read so it couldn't be altered. That was fine with me. I wasn't pregnant, I didn't have any diseases or addictions, and my genotype was as real as real could be. I wasn't worried he would say no. I was worried he would say yes.

After a moment he looked up and said, "OK."

And just like that I was in.

"What if I don't want to . . ." My voice trailed off.

"Screw one of the customers?" Spencer laughed. "Don't worry. Technically the house is a social club. Patrons pay to get in, sex isn't guaranteed. For some clients, being turned down adds verisimilitude to the experience. Besides, if you won't do a client, someone else will."

Those perfect blue eyes mocked me. You'll do it, they said. Whatever the client wants.

When did pimps start dressing like Hollywood agents and using words like verisimilitude?

Every little girl wants to grow up to be Madonna. In a country where attention span is defined by the cuts between music videos, Madonna changed herself frequently enough to hold everyone's attention, and the more success she had, the more dominant she became, celebrity building on itself into a lethal feedback loop that no one could resist.

I'm sure no one in the eighties guessed that Madonna was going to be the pop icon of the *twenty-first* century, but in hindsight we probably all should've known.

She offered so much: the young runaway dressed in trashy clothes, the *Die Another Day* spy in black leather, the vogue Madonna in see-through lace, the tiger, the chains, the conical bra. There was a Madonna for everyone.



Spencer gave me a tab that got me onto a bus with three other Madonnas. I was the classic version, like in 'Papa Don't Preach'. One of the others was a pretty girl with short brown hair I immediately labeled Early Madonna. Then there was a leather dominatrix from *Sex*.

The third looked a lot like me. She was the 'Material Girl' Madonna. Her blonde hair was done up like Marilyn Monroe's and she wore a pink satin evening gown and a sparkling diamond necklace, though of course the jewels were paste.

Nothing on that bus was genuine, not really.

I don't care what the courts say.

Anyway, there was no driver on the bus and no gentlemen callers, either. (I found out later that the 'guests' were transported in limos with actual human chauffeurs.) So we fed our tabs into the reader and the bus shut its doors and pulled smoothly out of the parking lot heading for an unnamed destination somewhere in the Nevada desert.

It may surprise you that four women with no identities and thus no protection would get on a bus to nowhere, but we all understood that the enterprise in which Mr Spencer was involved was of questionable legality. We could hardly expect him to take chances.

Prostitution wasn't the problem. This *was* Nevada after all. It was the very idea of *being* Madonna that was dangerous.

You see, the four of us on that bus weren't look-alikes dressed up like Madonna, we weren't even women surgically altered to look like Madonna.

No, we were the genuine article, right down to our DNA.

Who knows, one of us could've even been the *real* Madonna.

You never can tell.



You probably know that in the thirties Dr P.K. Singh developed a working retroviral editor, a molecular tool that could actually rewrite a genetic string. This meant that doctors could fix a lot of hereditary killers like breast cancer and Tay-Sachs and Down's. Naturally, Dr Singh won the Nobel Prize.

And then, a year or two later, weird things started to happen. You know all those stories in the tabloids saying that Elvis is alive and well and working the nightshift at a Seven-Eleven in suburban Detroit?

Sure enough the King showed up, except he was an insurance salesman in a small town in Tennessee. Priscilla and the estate sued, of course. Only to find out that it really was Elvis, genetically at least.

And that's when the American public finally realized that P.K. Singh's wonder tool could do a lot more than cure sick people. It could change a person's entire genetic structure into something else. Some*one* else.

Eventually, the court determined that there were enough logical inconsistencies in the new Elvis's story that he couldn't be legit and the judge ruled for the estate.

But Pandora's box had been flung wide open and there was no shutting it again.

If you were willing to endure Singh's treatment, use nanotech and surgery to touch up your biometrics, and immerse yourself in the character, you could be somebody else. And there were plenty of crazies willing to do it. Fans and con artists, and of the two, the fans were scarier.

The super rich lost a fortune. There wasn't a security system around that could protect you when the thief had your face and voice, your fingerprints, even your retinas.

Obsessed fans passed themselves off as rock stars or athletes or actors.

A democratic senator named John Mullen from Minnesota switched his party affiliation and the DNC accused him of being a Republican changeling who had murdered the real Senator Mullen. Sounds ridiculous, I know, but during the next election cycle, Mullen's democratic rival made the charge a central part of his campaign. (He lost.)

But the weirdest case was that of a little girl named Jenny Hartley.

I tried to sleep on the long, quiet bus ride, but my stomach was filled with a light, fluttery fear and my mind was racing, so after awhile I touched the flat screen inlaid in the seat in front of me.

The screen lit up. I adjusted the audio so it would loop through my neural implant. I didn't want to wake up any of the other Madonnas, especially not the one dressed all in leather – scary.

I selected a cable news channel, I don't remember which one.

The screen blinked and a slim, African-American reporter stood in front of the U.S. Supreme Court building. "Yes, that's right, Carrie," he said. "This case began some seven years ago in the Delaware courts, where Mr Hartley's business was incorporated, and only now has made its way to the highest court in the land. The nine justices heard oral arguments last October and we're now being told by the clerk of the court," he touched his earpiece as if he were getting breaking news, though that of course was ridiculous, "that a decision will be announced soon."

The picture switched to a stunning fortyish woman with shoulder-length auburn hair and watery blue eyes who looked like she'd be very comfortable on the cover of *Cosmo* wearing something slinky. "Thank you, Walter. And there you have it ladies and gentlemen, the U.S. Supreme Court, the highest court in the land, will soon render final judgment in the case of *Hartley v. Jane Doe, et al.*"

I had to smile at the case name. It was appropriate, but who was Hartley and who was Jane Doe? Aye, there's the rub.

Suddenly I didn't want to know how the court would rule, didn't care if it made what me and the other Madonnas were doing legal or illegal. Why should I care what nine old men and women thought, just because they wore black robes and called themselves the highest court in the land?

They would make up a rule, because making up rules was their job, but beyond that they didn't have any special wisdom.

That much I knew for a fact.

I sighed. I couldn't sleep and I didn't want to watch the vid, so I sat in silence for the rest of the ride and watched the desert roll by.

Jenny Hartley was an eight-year-old girl whose parents were killed when their executive jet smashed into the choppy gray-blue waters of the Atlantic going better than 300 knots.

This terrible accident left little Jenny the sole heir to business holdings of something like $800 million. And because she had no living relatives she was raised by a series of corporate functionaries who really didn't know her at all.

Not exactly the kind of people who'd remember what color dress she'd worn at her ninth birthday party or what her favorite boy band was when she was fourteen or other details that could trip an imposter up.

And unfortunately the accident had happened years before Full Quantum ID was developed.

In hindsight, it wasn't much of a surprise that by the time she was eighteen and finally able to exercise her controlling interest in her father's vast business empire there were a grand total of seventeen Jenny Hartleys and no one, *no one*, knew who was the real one.

Sometime after midnight I saw it, a sprawling mansion painted creamy white with marble columns and great bay windows that glinted in the silver moonlight.

The bus drove right past it, crested a little hill, and then turned right on a small, rural road on the downhill side. After awhile the bus stopped at a ten-foot gate topped by concertina wire. I saw the winking emerald eye of a laser and the gate glided open and the bus drove in.

We turned a corner and I saw row upon row of little trailers, you know the kind I'm talking about, they remind you of a loaf of bread except they're the color of brushed aluminum. The bus pulled to a stop and its door whooshed open.

I drew in a deep breath and made myself stand. Behind me the other Madonnas were waking up and starting to rise.

I stepped off the bus.

There was another Madonna there, an old Madonna, you know the one who married Guy Ritchie and had Lourdes and Rocco. Her arms were folded across her chest and even in the silver moonlight her face was hard.

Well, why not? This was a hard business.

"Hello," I said.

She jerked her head to the left. "Over there."

The others tumbled off the bus and lined up next to me. Old Madonna checked a data pad and said, "Good evening, ladies. Welcome to The House of the Beata Virgo."

She handed each of us a red datatab with a white number stamped on it. Mine was 18.

"These are the keys to your trailers. Please leave your personal belongings there." Her voice said *please* but her tone said *you damn well better do it, bitch*. "Here are the rules. You're expected at the main house by 4 p.m. every day."

"Every day?" asked Material Girl, a little quiver in her voice.

Old Madonna shook her head, like we were the stupidest gaggle of Madonnas she'd ever met. "You get every other Sunday off. Now shut up and listen. I don't have all night. We'll send a bus for you. When you step on that bus, you leave your own life behind. You are never to discuss your past with a guest, nor are you ever, *ever* to bring a guest here." She met each of our eyes in turn. "Do you understand?"

We all nodded.

"The house takes 90% of whatever you earn. The balance will be deposited in a numbered account on your behalf."

A nasty laugh issued from the leather-clad Madonna. "You'll deposit the money in an *account*? What do you take us for?"

Old Madonna scowled. "We're not trying to cheat you, hon. Each of you will receive a Short Quantum."

Leather's eyes narrowed, but she said nothing.

And really what could she say? Short Quantum was much weaker than Full Quantum ID, but it was better than nothing. On the whole an account tied to a Short Quantum key was probably more secure than cash.

"We're giving you the night to settle in. The bus will come for you tomorrow."

"What if we need something?" asked Early Madonna. I wondered how old she was. She looked early twenties, but of course there was no way to tell.

Old Madonna rolled her eyes and looked at me. "Any more stupid questions?"

"Sure," I said, "what's your name?"

Old Madonna's eyes narrowed, her lip curled, and I thought for a second she was actually going to hit me. If looks could kill, as they say.

Her gaze swept away from me and pinned the three other women. "Just remember ladies," she said in a low, bitter voice, "if the house doesn't get paid, neither do you. There are plenty of other places to work, most not as clean or as safe as this one." She laughed, and it was a mean laugh. "But then I think most of you already know that."

That night I fell asleep thinking about the Hartley case. Sixteen of the seventeen Hartleys agreed to settle, but the seventeenth was holding out. No doubt because she believed it made her look like the real one.

The court had a tough decision on its hands. It could invalidate the settlement and impoverish the *real* Jenny Hartley or it could reward sixteen hucksters.

And needless to say there was no case law to rely on.

That night dark ghosts troubled my dreams.

It's women like us who make celebrities like Madonna care about the outcome of the Hartley case. Long before P.K. Singh came along there was a real Madonna; one, single, real woman who started with nothing and ended up with fame and wealth and celebrity.

And now we're all taking a free ride on the Madonna train.

We're not trying to steal her money, at least not like the seventeen Jenny Hartleys are trying to steal the Hartley estate, but we *are* trading on her reputation, her looks.

Her body.

And in doing so don't we take a little something away from her?

So that's why all the rockers, the teen hunks, the boy bands, the midriffs, the action heroes, the jocks, and the punks, rushed right out and filed amicus briefs with the high court.

Because who wanted a bunch of hookers pretending to be you turning tricks out in some lost corner of the Nevada desert?

The house itself was a sprawling mansion of elegantly appointed rooms. You know, a crystal chandelier hanging in the foyer, a Steinway in the drawing room, a roaring fire in the library.

Along with the gilt-edged luxury there were enough subtle touches to satisfy any fantasy. A hot tub in the back, rooms full of nothing but leather, masks, cat-o'-nine tails, bustiers that didn't cover the breasts, even a studio for making videos.

This is the way it worked. The various Madonnas waited in the various rooms of the house until a guest came to find us. The guests were mostly men, though not entirely – the idea of Madonna brought out some women, too – and mostly rich. Either way the initiative was entirely theirs.

That first evening I waited in a small nook just off the kitchen, sitting on a small padded bench, my legs tucked up under me, my hands folded neatly in my lap. I gazed out the nook's bay window, looking at the empty stillness of the desert as the sun dropped below the horizon.

I was wearing a denim skirt and a white cotton blouse. I thought that I might be passed over because I was too plain, but it turned out that many of the guests liked that innocent look.



"Hello."

I jumped.

I turned to see a man standing behind me. He wore khakis and a lime polo shirt. He was a little on the short side, five-nineish. He had dark, dark hair, almost black, and the most unusual green eyes. Everyone always talks about blue eyes, but it's green eyes that are really rare.

He wasn't bad looking either. A quick check of the polo shirt told me he managed to spend at least a few hours in the gym every week.

"H-Hello," I said back.

He frowned. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's OK," I said softly. "It's just that this is my first night and – "

"Oh." He raised his hands. I noticed the dull glint of a wedding band on his left ring finger. "I'm not here to, ah . . . "

He was staring at me.

"Then why are you here?" I asked.

"Clients," he said quickly. "I have some clients in from Japan. They really wanted to come to this place. Hey, do you think we could talk? You know, while I wait."

I patted the bench next to me. "We can do anything you want."

He laughed to show he knew it was a joke, even though we both knew it wasn't. He sat down next to me.

"My name is Glenn. Glenn Wattley."

He extended his hand and we shook. His touch was firm but gentle, he didn't crush my hand like some business men who, when they shake your hand, are trying to prove they have the biggest penis in the room.

After a second he said, "What's your name?"

I smiled. "Louise Veronica Ciccone."

He smiled back. "No, I mean your real name."

"That *is* my real name," I said and I meant it.

"So you're trying to tell me you're the real Madonna?"

"Of course I'm the real Madonna."

"No, I mean the *real* real Madonna."

The rumor was that the real Madonna occasionally came to the house for a little fun, giving the phrase self-love a whole new meaning. Almost certainly this rumor was spread by the House itself to drum up interest, but in the end, who could really tell?

Every year Madonnas are killed in car accidents or cut by johns or OD on drugs. I shrugged. "Who's to say whether the original is even still alive?"

He held out his left hand, palm up. "I'm pretty sure the original has one of these."

I leaned forward and touched his hand. I felt a small pebble just beneath the skin of his palm. I couldn't see it, but I could feel it.

A Full Quantum ID.

Implanted in his palm were a set of particles entangled with another set of particles held in a vault somewhere. If there was ever a question of identity it would be quickly resolved.

No one would ever steal away Glenn Wattley's life.

When did we start relying on technology to answer the most basic of human questions?

He leaned forward to touch my hands and the back of his arm brushed the side of my breast.

Right then I knew how it was going to go.

"No bumps," I said sadly.

"No bumps," he said breathlessly.

He looked into my eyes and I looked back and then he leaned forward and kissed me, a slow, soft lingering kiss that I bet melted Mrs Wattley right down to her toes.

I could've pulled back, could've said no. Instead I put my hand on his shoulder and pulled him closer, kissed back.

Remembering Lakota Spencer and his mocking blue eyes.

Whatever the client wants.

He took me right there, tearing the buttons off my white cotton blouse and pushing my bra up. Then he touched me, the marker in his left palm tracing lines of sensation all over my stolen body.

After we were done we went to a room and made love again, this time slowly, tenderly. Afterwards I cried, apologizing frantically through my tears.

"Shh," he whispered. His arms closed around me in a perfect circle. "It's OK. Shh."

Maybe he thought it was the first time I'd sold my body to a stranger (and it was) or even that I was the virgin promised by the House's name (I wasn't). Either way, that wasn't the reason I was crying. No, I had given up something far more valuable than my body or even my virtue, something I could never get back. And *that's* why I was crying.

Whatever he thought, he held me tight until I finally fell asleep, warm, tired, and cradled in his arms.

Sometime during the night I left him.

When I got off the bus the next evening, I found a great crowd of Madonnas huddled around the holoset in the study, smiling and laughing and toasting with the sparkling champagne usually reserved for the guests.

I caught the eye of Early Madonna, the same girl who came in with me on the bus. "What is it?"

She giggled. "The Supreme Court announced its decision."

I sucked in a startled breath. My mouth suddenly tasted dry. "W-What did they – "

"They ruled for us," said a 'Like a Prayer' Madonna, slurring her words.

This decision wasn't actually about us Madonnas, but if the Supreme Court were willing to let what they thought were sixteen frauds feed on the rotting carcass of Hartley Industries, they weren't very likely to rule against a bunch of hookers who at least were honest about what they were.

Hartley v. Jane Doe, et al set a precedent.

Someone pushed a glass of champagne into my hand.

"They divided the Hartley estate seventeen ways," said another Madonna.

"Can you believe it?" said the Material Girl. "A $47 million payout for all of them."

"That's bullshit," I snapped. I flung my glass against the hearth and it shattered into a million pieces.

The room suddenly fell quiet.

Old Madonna looked at me through narrowed eyes. "What's your problem, hon?"

I felt my cheeks warm. "Didn't any of you think what this might mean to the real Jenny Hartley?"

"Near as I can figure," said Old Madonna coldly, "it means she gets $47 million."

"If she's one of the seventeen," I shot back.

Early Madonna frowned at me, obviously confused. "Of course she is. Why wouldn't she be?"

"Maybe because she couldn't bear to watch a bunch of lawyers carve up her life, her memories, her*self*."

"Then she's a fool," snapped Old Madonna. "And she deserves whatever she gets."

"Can you imagine," I said, my throat tightening around the words, "to lose your parents and then to have the last fragments of your life stolen by imposters?"

I glanced around a room and saw not a single friendly face. Because of course they could imagine. Of all people *they* could imagine, these women who'd suffered beatings and rapes, incest and abortion, grinding poverty and the sour pit of despair that forms in your stomach when you realize you've just run out of hope.

They had nothing left in the world.

Not even their names.

All they had was Madonna's face. Madonna's body.

And they thought I was trying to take even this from them.

Leather Madonna tossed back her champagne. "Girlfriend, I think maybe you should learn to relax a little."

I swallowed past the painful tightness in my throat. "Yeah, maybe you're right. Sorry."

They turned away from me, happy to get back to their good time, all except for Old Madonna who watched me as I slipped out of the study.

I went to the back deck and slipped off my shoes so I could feel the smooth redwood boards beneath my feet. The sun set and I watched the stars wink into existence one by one as the sky purpled. I stood there for a long time, bathed in the light of the full moon, staring up into the hard, cold heavens, trying not to think.

"Hello," said an uncertain male voice, "is that, ah, you?"

I turned and saw the guest from the night before. There was just enough light for me to make out that he wore a pale blue Oxford shirt and gray slacks. He carried a black garment bag slung over his shoulder.

I couldn't quite make out the color of his eyes in the darkness.

"Hello, yourself," I said, surprised to see him.

Who comes back to a hooker who cries after you screw her? It doesn't fit any of the regular fantasies. I didn't know yet that it did, that some men like vulnerable women.

It makes them feel strong.

"I have to go," he said, and I shivered at the apology in his voice.

In our little girl hearts every hooker has the same fantasy: that some day a man will come, the right man, the perfect man, a man who will sweep you off your feet and deliver you from all your problems.

All your sins.

It never, ever works that way, of course.

But it doesn't mean we want it any less.

He set the bag down and walked towards me. He touched me on the shoulder and I leaned in to him. He put his arms around me. He smelled like a man: like sweat and cologne and sex.

"I want to see you again," he whispered.

"That would be nice," I whispered back, not sure if it was true or not.

"Tell me your name," he said. "So I can find you."

I looked up at him. It was the most basic rule at the House of the Beautiful Virgin, never tell the guests your name. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't think about it.

I tasted the delicious, deadly words on my lips.

My name is Jennifer, I almost said.

Instead, I said, "We don't have names. Not like you mean." I touched his face. "But if you come back, I'll be here."

Or someone would be. Someone who looked, *felt* exactly like me. And that would have to do.

Because all he was buying was the persona. The woman beneath the persona was lost to him.

Lost to me.

He nodded and leaned down to brush my lips with his.

And then he was gone.

And that's just about it.

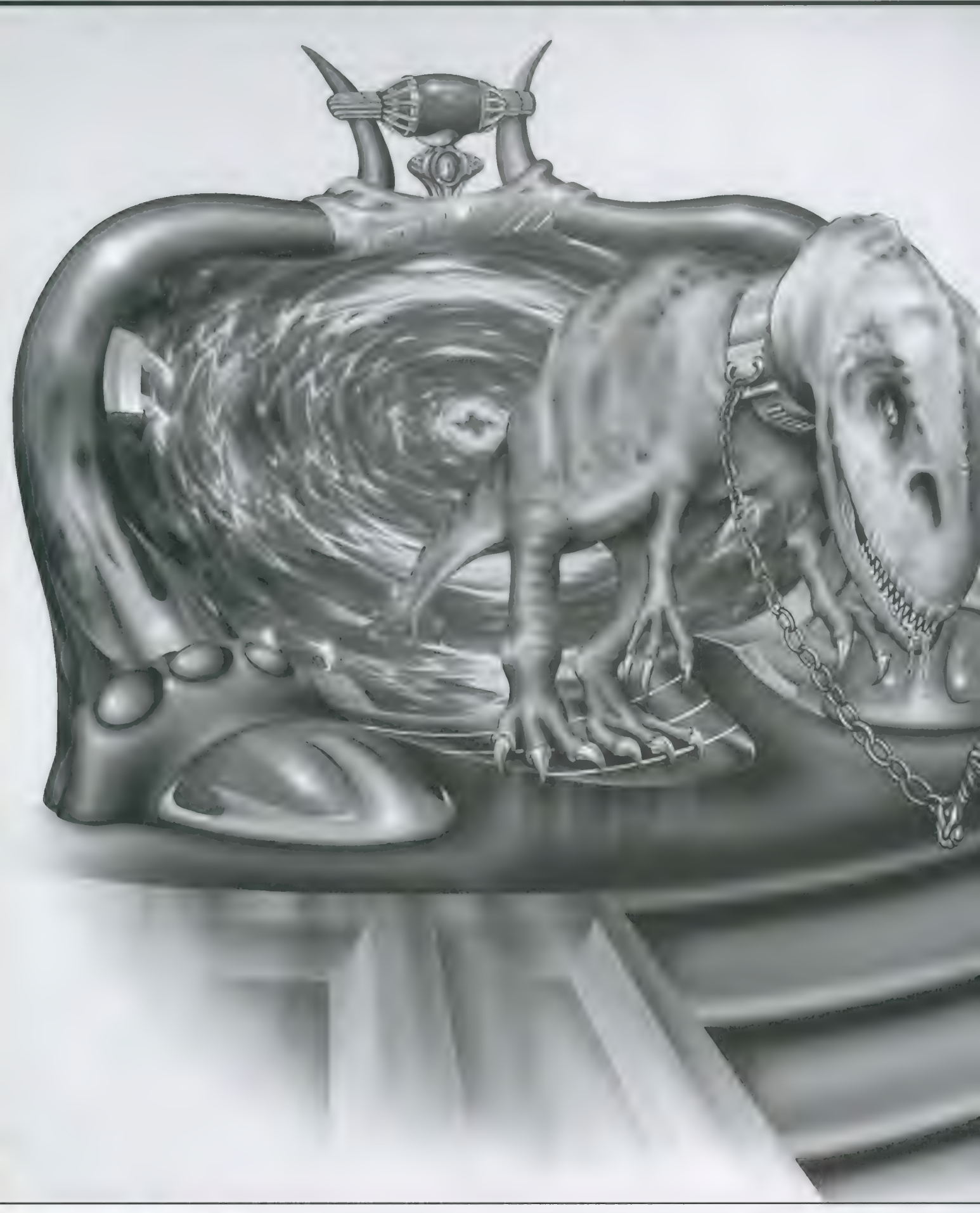
Maybe you wonder where I came from and who I am. You're thinking, are you the *real* Jenny Hartley?

Well, I won't tell you. Because you don't really care. What could I possibly offer you that is as alluring, as exciting as the opportunity to share the pleasures of a celebrity's body?

In America, all we want is the stories we already know.

Steven Mohan, Jr lives in Pueblo, Colorado with his wife and three children. His short stories have appeared in various publications, but this is his first appearance in *Interzone*.

STORIES > GARP AND GERONAMID BY NEAL ASHER > ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN G. WILLIAMS



Garp & Geronamid

Neal Asher



The grey-bearded park labourer reminded Salind of Earth and autumn, though the man was not raking up leaves. It was treelfall on Banjer – a season with no real Terran equivalent – and the snakish creatures squirming from the pox of holes in the banoaks were dying. Having raked the fallen into slightly shifting drifts, the man began forking the spaghetti tangle into his wheelbarrow.

"I'll be damned," said Salind, initiating the 'save' facility in Argus.

He watched the man for a while longer, then hoisted his rucksack more securely onto his shoulders before moving on. Shortly he came to where a black and twisted banoak had spilled from its hollow branches a thick crop of treels across the path. The banoak itself reminded him of a baobab, though he vaguely recollected it was not in fact a tree, being more akin to a tube worm. The parasitic treels were black and grey, and on average half a metre long. With their narrow heads and disc-shaped feeding mouths, they appeared more like lampreys, than the eels after which they were named. Salind subvocalised a question and Argus, his internal augmentation, replied in its lecturing tone:

Because its life cycle is utterly confined to the soft tissues and hollow branches of the banoak, it will attempt to feed on any soft tissue with which it comes into contact. Avoidance is recommended.

Salind looked askance at the writhing mass as he stepped off the path and onto the spherule grass to bypass it.

"Why do they die?" he asked.

There came a pause from Argus as it accessed the relevant files.

A poison from the aforementioned soft tissues accumulates in the creatures and kills them off in their fifth year. Shall I continue?

"Might as well," said Salind. "I don't suppose Garp's there yet."

As I mentioned, the treel's entire life cycle is confined to the interior of the banoak. There it feeds on the soft tissues of the polychaete body, mates and lays its eggs. By their fifth year the treels die from a cumulative poison in the polychaete's flesh. It was first thought the poison served no other purpose than to rid the banoak creature of this parasite. It is now known that the treel's relationship with its host is mutualistic rather than parasitic. The treels, as well as feeding on the banoak, protect it from predation. Creatures that feed on the banoak inevitably ingest treels and can sicken and die from the poison concentrated inside them.

"They harvest them, don't they?" said Salind, his attention being drawn to a large tanker parked under some distant banoaks. He could hear the cavitating roar of a vacuum pump and see another park

labourer sucking up the creatures with a wide ribbed hose.

The poison accumulates in their skin. For humans that substance works as a narcotic and mild hallucinogen. The treels are mulched, pressed and dried and what remains is mostly skin. They make a tea from it here.

"I guess I'll have to give that a try then," said Salind, though he did not particularly relish the prospect.

The tea is as addictive as nicotine. Most people here drink it.

"Then I'll take a detoxicant course afterwards. My audience will want to know what it's like."

At the centre of the park stood a monolithic quartz crystal into the lattices of which had been recorded the names and personal histories of the thousands who had died during the civil war here a century earlier. The deeply translucent crystal ran in its depths holograms taken randomly from those personal histories. Positioned all around it were seats for spectators, though they were unoccupied today and, studying the figure standing with his back to the crystal, Salind could understand why.

This man's clothing resembled an antique acceleration suit with its webwork of veins sandwiched in metallic fabric. Pipes were also visible at his joints and curved up from the neck ring, and fluid vessels were affixed here and there on the suit's surface. This clothing was not really of great note though. Others dressed more exotically and few would so much as blink an eye at them. However, this man seemed ill: his face greyish and his eyes containing a sickly yellow tint. When he turned to gaze up at the crystal, it became evident that the tubes from the neck ring entered the base of his skull. As Salind drew closer he noted fingertips frayed down to the bone, eye irrigators at the man's temples, skull exposed through holes in shaven scalp. Closer still and he caught the first whiff of putrefaction. For what Garp suffered there was no cure – him being dead.

As soon as the Tarjen Network picked up on the story, Salind knew that it had to be his. It was a perfect footnote to the big story on Banjer at the moment: the imminent arrival of the Arbiter of Transition, the awesome AI Geronamid, and subsumption of this world into the Polity.

Since the civil war, during which a theocracy had been bloodily usurped then replaced by more conventional government, there had been plenty of murders solved, or not, by the usual methods. However, there had not been a reification of a murder victim in a hundred years.

When the strange cult of Anubis Arisen governed Banjer, every viable murder victim had been reified and sent after his murderer. The victim's dead brain was decoded and the essential mind and memory downloaded into an augmentation. Cyber motors at the joints moved the body, which was partially preserved by chemicals. Obviously more complex than this, the system utilised, in some reifs, surviving brain tissue, and historians argued that such were still alive. Others argued that reifs possessed self-determination and even whilst running fully on the augmentation were AI. For a century the whole argument had been moot, that is, until Garp came on the scene.

Salind had scanned the files at stopovers while en route to Banjer. Garp had been an inspector in the Banjer police force. The last five years of his life had been spent trying to convict a woman by the name of Deleen Soper, who had allegedly made a fortune manufacturing a drug called praist, somewhere on this world. During those five years he had made enough headway to become an annoyance to the Tronad – a criminal organization reputed to be close seizing power on Banjer and of which Soper was, again allegedly, the head. Several ensuing attempts on his life impelled him to make a will specifying that, should he die within a certain period, he wanted to be reified, and for this purpose transferred funds to what was left of the Church of Anubis Arisen. Shortly after doing so, he revealed himself to be a praist addict going into terminal psychosis, turned up at the Church's headquarters and, after presenting the relevant documentation, shot himself through the heart.

"Hello, I'm Salind. I'm glad you agreed to speak to me." Salind held out his hand.

Garp stared at this member for a moment, but made no move to take it. After a clicking gulp deep in his throat he said, "I won't shake your hand. I don't yet know the strength of the cyber motors in my finger joints, also I shouldn't think it very pleasant shaking hands with a corpse."

Salind forced a grin and dropped his arm to his side.

"Are you recording now?" Garp asked.

"I am, and obviously I have a lot of questions to ask you . . . "

Garp held up one hideous palm. "One moment."

At his throat he made an adjustment to a recessed control plate. There came a faint hissing sound. When he spoke next his voice was smoother. "That's better. My vocal chords are decaying despite the vascular balm. Airborne bacteria."

"An unusual experience, I'd imagine," said Salind, feeling foolish.

Garp said nothing for a moment. Salind wondered if he was being given an annoyed look. Perhaps he was, only Garp's mummified features revealed nothing.

"I'm a reif," was all he said. And with that he took a handgun from his belt and held it up for Salind to see.

"Ah." Salind held off from putting a call for help through Argus. Banjer being out-Polity for the present, Polity Monitors could do nothing, and it would take at least ten minutes for the Tarjen staffers to get to him. Anyway, episodes like this made a story. The weapon – an old station-developed rail gun – was the sort of thing that carried a twenty round box and had a range measured in metres rather than kilometres. Salind thought it better suited to a museum. "What, exactly, is that for?" he asked, keeping his voice level.

"I'm attached to it. You know that a reif's only protection under Banjer law is as part of the estate of the deceased? Only property laws apply."

"Yes, I knew that. Tell me, why did you choose to be reified?"

"Because I needed more time than what remained to me to get her."

"Ah, I see. You refer to Deleen Soper. Why were you so determined to prosecute her?"

"Because I was a detective," said Garp.

"I note you use the past tense. You no longer work for the Banjer police?"

"I do not. I no longer have to get a court order for searches and I no longer have to present cases to a corrupt judiciary. The interesting thing is that I cannot commit a crime either. You have to be a person to commit a crime."

Salind watched as Garp hooked the rail gun back on his utility belt.

"There've been rumours of corruption but none have yet been

proven," he said. The presence of the gun was making him nervous and undermining his usual smooth technique. Garp pointed towards one of the far entrances of the park and began to stroll in that direction. Salind fell in beside him.

"Soper has been indicted for drug trafficking four times and for murder three times. Every time the case was brought before the same judge and then thrown out. In any Polity court the evidence would have been sufficient to have her mind-wiped or executed. I checked. She has, to my knowledge, three of the five city judges and most of the Council in her pocket, and that's only in this city."

"Those are serious accusations. What proof do you have?"

"I had full sensorium recordings of conversations and bribes, documentation, and eighteen witnesses. When I . . . died, my files were dumped. Of the witnesses, four went off-world, and seven suffered fatal accidents while I was alive. Two more made official withdrawals of their statements, and the remaining five were hit while I was being reified."

"Is Soper implicated in all this?"

Garp looked at Salind. "What do you think? There's no admissible evidence and the judiciary is refusing the investigators permission to investigate."

"What then are your intentions?"

Garp remained silent for a moment. He halted at a spill of treels before speaking. "I saw the look you gave this gun. It's not what you think. It's the only piece of hard evidence I possess." He turned and gazed directly at Salind, his eye irrigators hazing the air around his face with spray. "You know, they wiped me out. All my files, even my personal files were dumped from the system. It was an accident they said. I might as well have not existed." Garp walked on, crunching treels underfoot.

"This hard evidence . . . ?" Salind said, moving round the treel spill.

"Useless now of course. This weapon had her fingerprints and DNA traces on the handle. It was found by the body of Aaron Dane. She'd blown off both his legs at the knee before beating him to death with the barrel. And so confident was she in her control of the judiciary, and certain police officials, she didn't bother to get rid of the evidence. I had it all on record . . ."

"Well, it'll all change with the arrival of Geronamid. Corruption tends to wither under AI governance."

Garp made a rough hacking sound. It took a moment for Salind to realise it was a laugh. Garp glanced sideways at him. "I do not possess your faith in AI governance. Either the vote will be fixed to keep us out of the Polity or if we go in Soper will refocus her business interests. She's wealthy enough now to play the upright citizen."

"Wouldn't you say that what such people do is more about power than wealth?"

As they reached the gateway to the park, Garp did not immediately reply. They walked out onto the pavement alongside a street crammed with hydrocars. The air was humid with their exhausts.

"Maybe, but Soper is not stupid enough to go up against the Polity. She'll be a good citizen and her past will be dumped just as absolutely as mine. The amnesty will see to that. Soper is sitting back in a no-lose position. If the Tronad prevents the Polity takeover they're OK. If they don't, they get amnesty; the slate wiped clean, a new beginning."

"I can see how that would upset you."

"Masterly understatement."

"Perhaps we should begin at the beginning." Salind pointed to a roadside café. "Present your case to me and through me to the citizens of the Polity."

Garp stopped at a crossing and before stepping out said, "We'll need a private booth. My presence tends to put people off their lunch."

Two five-metre tall nacreous bull's horns framed a shimmering meniscus eight metres across. The shimmer broke, and somersaulting through it onto the black glass dais came a young man clad in a white slicksuit. His hair was blue, face painted.

"Well, I'm sure we could call it something like: 'He fought what he has become – corruption'," said Salind.

Geoff, the staffer from the Tarjen offices, nodded then made adjustments on the fullsense recorder he was holding – a device that could record with greater clarity than the hardware inside Salind's skull. A tall woman with an external aug almost covering her head, gave them both a dirty look from amid the crowd of reporters.

"A rather flip way of treating his story. Garp was and is a good man," said Geoff.

Salind studied him for a moment. Tarjen employed its staffers from the local population. It might be worth doing a few interviews.

"I'm sure that's true," said Salind. "But, though a good story, it's a footnote to the main event. This." Salind gestured to the runcible portal as two Golem androids, without artificial skin, stepped through and aside as guards. Salind wondered what that was about. Their metal skeletons were grey, almost corroded in appearance – a highly unusual occurrence.

"If this is what you're here for, then shaddup and watch," said the woman.

"Get your bloody great metal head out of the way, Merril," said the man behind her.

"Is it my problem you're a short-arse?" she snapped back.

"It's certainly my problem that your pea-brain needs such a large augmentation."

The bickering continued as next through the portal came four Earth Monitors in full battle dress. They were armoured and carried gas-system pulse assault rifles. They moved out on either side to stand by the Golem androids.

"Bit OTT," said the man trying to see past Merril's aug-shrouded head.

"All show," said Merril. "The effective forces are already here."

"You what?" said the man.

"She means," said Salind, "that Geronamid's agents have probably been arriving here and establishing themselves over the last few months if not years."

Geoff gave him a look then returned his attention to his recorder.

"I don't need some kidrep from that Tarjen rag to explain my words," said Merril, without looking round. Salind ignored her and nodded to the waiting crowd of dignitaries.

"Probably knows every one of their dirty little secrets. Bloody hell, that's a bit extravagant even for Geronamid."

Those who had been watching the dignitaries, or subvocalising commentaries, paused. Through the portal had come two voluptuous women clad as fantasy barbarians. What drew the attention even more, however, was that they each held silver chain leashes connecting to the collar of a huge allosaur.

"Someone tell me that's an automaton and not from the fossil gene project," said the man behind Merril.

"That's an automaton and not from the fossil gene project," said Salind.

"Thanks for that."

Next came jugglers and street musicians, followed by a crowd who seemed to have just come from a party. The arrival lounge rapidly filled with a cacophony of sound and movement.

"Well where the hell is Geronamid?" asked Geoff, as he swept the area with the sensor heads of his recorder. Salind pointed to the lone acrobat who had come through first and was now doing back-flips in front of the increasingly irritated-looking allosaur.

"Him usually," he said. "Though it's difficult to tell. On Tarus Five Geronamid came through dispersed – memory units implanted in each of twelve circus clowns."

The group of dignitaries began to make their way across the lounge, heading towards the acrobat.

"Looks like I was right," said Salind. "They'll have been told who to greet."

The dignitaries had nearly reached the acrobat, who ceased his display and stood with his arms held out in greeting. There came a stuttering thud as of the sound of a lump of meat being thrown into a fan. The smile on the acrobat's face disappeared along with his head. Brains and pieces of bone sprayed over the allosaur.

After a shocked pause someone started screaming.

"Rail gun," commented Merril and chaos broke loose. Police and security agents were running around shouting into personal coms units. Salind saw one of these men lose his leg then fall to the ground, his expression puzzled. Salind was still watching and recording when Geoff grabbed him and dragged him to the floor.

"Let me up! Let me the fuck up!" Salind yelled. Eventually Geoff rolled away and Salind scrambled to his feet. He scanned quickly and saw where Merril and the rest of the vultures were heading. The two skinless androids had pinned someone to the floor. The Earth Monitors kept the crowd from gathering around this individual, and the Banjer police encircled the acrobat's remains.

"Let me through! Let me through!" yelled Salind, using his trusted elbows and knees technique to get to the forefront of the first crowd. When arrived there he recognised a slightly putrid smell, and seeing the pinned figure he felt a moment's horrible glee.

"Shit we've got a story," he said, then paused. He felt the crowd clearing from behind him. A hot breath raised the hairs on the back of his neck. Turning, he looked straight into the tooth-filled mouth of the blood-spattered allosaur. Its leashes were broken. It glanced aside at the dead acrobat then down at the prisoner. Salind quickly stepped aside.

"Murderer," came a guttural accusation from the allosaur.

Garp glared up from the floor, his eye-irrigators working overtime. His eyes were blank white spheres overlaid with narrow gridlines.

The room was clean, aseptic and not a very nice place to be. Formchairs positioned against white tile, were all in perfect condition, no graffiti marred the walls, and not a speck of dust or rubbish littered the banoak coral floor. Yet the room smelt of vomit and fear. Salind tried to ignore that, since it didn't apply to him, being a Polity citizen.

"The AI Geronamid arrived on Banjer in the skull of a living allosaur, reputedly resurrected by the fossil gene project at the University of Earth on Midlantis Island. In this 'acting of parable' he demonstrated the co-existence of the old and the new. The attempted assassination of Geronamid by another resurrectee, one Abel Garp, a reified officer of the Banjer police force, has undermined the . . . Yes?" asked Salind.

The Banjer cop said nothing, but gestured to the door with his thumb. Salind considered walking out right then, since he didn't *have* to help them. But then, there'd be more here for his story. Even though he was way ahead of all the other agencies, he went.

The cop led him down a perfectly clean corridor and opened another door for him. Salind entered and felt suddenly as if he had stepped back five hundred years.

"An interrogation cell. How quaint," he commented.

"Sit down," instructed the man behind the desk.

Salind glanced up at the camera set up in the corner of the room. A meaty hand on his back propelled him gently but firmly to the stool on the other side of the desk. He sat, and just to show his confidence he crossed his legs and casually scanned his surroundings.

"You are Mr Gem Salind?"

"Just call me Salind, everyone does."

The man opposite did not look up. "I am Superintendent Callus – by name and nature some say. You are aware that when you came to Banjer you stepped out of Polity jurisdiction?"

Callus looked up and, placing his elbows on the desk, interlaced his fingers before his mouth.

"I was aware. I am also aware that I have broken no laws, be they of the Polity or Banjer," Salind replied.

Callus nodded. "Having knowledge of a serious crime and not reporting it to the authorities is a crime in itself."

"So I understand, and if I'd knowledge of such I would, of course, report it to you immediately."

"You knew what Garp intended."

"No, if you'd listened to my statement at the time . . . "

"You saw the rail gun."

"Oh get real. It's all a matter of public record. If he threatened anyone it was Deleen Soper and that's debateable."

A hard hand clouted him on the back of his head.

"What the fuck!"

He half turned, but the thug behind him grabbed his hair and yanked his head back. He was forced to continue looking forwards.

"Around here we respect the law." As Callus said this, the thug behind drove a fist into Salind's kidneys.

"You fucking – "

Another blow curtailed speech, and more blows followed.

I'm being assaulted in the Siroc police headquarters!

Message relayed.

Finally released, Salind fell from the chair onto his hands and knees and retched up his breakfast.

"Are you in pain? Would you like me to get a doctor?" Callus enquired.

Salind could not reply, so leaning over to peer down at him, Callus continued, "I understand that you can record everything you see, hear and smell. Perhaps you'd like to edit that mess out." He nodded towards the pool of vomit. "Perhaps it would also be well for you to remember that you cannot see everything and not everything is said. In future I suggest you report to us before you release unsubstantiated stories about our citizens."

Message reply: Geoff is on his way over and the Tarjen legal

department has been informed. Geoff also sends a personal message: 'They will only rough you up a little. If anything more was intended you would not have been taken to the police station. You would have been taken to the Groves.'

Finally managing to get his breath, Salind struggled to his feet and turned towards his attacker. The cop had stepped back and now stood with his hands behind his back – the perfect image of the disinterested observer. It had all been done very well.

"You won't get away . . . with this," Salind managed, then could have kicked himself for such naivete.

"Get away with what, exactly?" said Callus. "Now, Mr Salind, if you could bear my words in mind we would be grateful for your cooperation."

Callus stood up and reached across the desk to shake Salind's hand.

"Fuck off." Salind moved to the door keeping the both of them in view. No one followed him out. He staggered to the waiting room then to the security barrier leading out onto the street. Fifty metres down the pavement, his breathing had become a little easier when a hydrocar pulled up and its door popped open. He clambered in.

"You OK?" asked Geoff.

"I think they were acting as Deleen Soper's message delivery service." Salind probed his bruised kidneys.

"Quite likely. What now?"

"Pull the legals off. I don't want anything getting in the way. Then I want to find out what's happening with Garp. Geronamid's people grabbed him didn't they?"

"Yes, then what?"

"Then I interview Deleen Soper."

Geoff looked askance at him then pulled the hydrocar out into the traffic. "Already been done," he said.

"What, Merril's hack and slash job?"

"Yes, and Merril better keep her head down or she'll get a hack and slash job in return."

"Really?"

"Really."

The new Polity Embassy sprawled across twenty hectares of reclaimed marshland on the south side of Siroc, which was the capital city of the planet's main continent. At the centre of the complex rested a replica of the Millennium Dome of old London on Earth – an ironical architectural statement if ever there was one. The Monitor driving one of the first antigravity cars to be used here, remained reticent on the subjects of Garp and Geronamid. Salind became insistent.

"You know that criminal actions here are out of your jurisdiction for the moment. I had a nice police officer explaining that sort of thing to me only a few hours ago. So why did you people grab him?" he asked.

"As I have already told you, Mr Salind, I do not possess that information," she replied.

Salind sat back as the car began to spiral down into the complex. "Perhaps you can tell me who Garp killed?"

"An acrobat, I believe." As she said this she touched her finger just below his ear – an unconscious action of someone listening to a comlink. She continued, "Geronamid will see you. Perhaps he will explain."

Salind grinned. There were thousands of reporters on Banjer who would have killed for this opportunity.

The Monitor landed the car on a plascrete parking area and, after they disembarked, led the way toward a nearby building bearing the appearance of a Turkish mosque. One of the grey metal Golem came out to meet them.

"This Golem will take you to the Arbiter." The Monitor hurried off with her finger pressed below her ear. Salind studied the Golem. It had not been referred to by name, which probably meant it was a blank Golem being run by one of Geronamid's sub-programs. And close to it now he realised it did appear corroded. Ceramal did not oxidize in air so this must have been caused by a powerful acid or some kind of energy burst. He wondered if this was just for the look or the result of some ambassadorial cock-up. Salind queried Argus and received an immediate reply, but he put that on hold.

"This way," said the Golem.

"Why the appearance?" Salind asked, as they entered the building.

"All part of Geronamid's implicit message," it said.

"Which part?"

The Golem paused before replying. "Membership of the Polity comes with all its advantages and drawbacks. All its AIs in every form. He would not want people to protest that the Polity had been mis-sold."

"Wouldn't a less threatening appearance have been better?"

"Exactly the point," said the Golem.

Salind listened to the message from Argus:

The two Golem androids that accompany Geronamid when the AI is on Arbitration duty owe their appearance to a Separatist attack on the world Cheyne III. An assassin attempted to kill Geronamid who, at that time, travelled inside an Egyptian sarcophagus. When the attack failed the assassin keyed her weapon to self destruct. The two Golem were caught in the backflash.

After entering the mosque through an open arch, they traversed a marble hall, to reach a wooden door the Golem opened by hand. In the antechamber beyond, an armoured ship droid hovered a couple of metres above the floor. Salind felt tingling sensation run from the top of his head to his feet. There came a discordant buzzing from Argus.

"Clear," spat the droid, and moved aside.

What was that?

Weapons scan.

"You will note," said the Golem, "very in your face."

A second door admitted them to the repro interior of a mosque. Garp was sitting on a wooden chair with his arms crossed, a cable trailing across the floor from the sockets in his head. His eyes were the same as they had appeared in the arrivals lounge, but Salind had no idea what that meant. Geronamid stood off to one side finishing his lunch, which looked like half a wildebeest. Salind started to sweat as the Golem closed the door behind him, not because of the crunching gobbling sounds, but because he had just discovered his aug's external link was being blocked.

"Why aren't you allowing me a direct link to Tarjen?" he asked.

Geronamid gulped down a large dripping lump of flesh. A disembodied voice replied, "You may record, and you will be allowed to transmit that recording once you leave here, should that be what you wish to do."

Salind tried to locate the source of the voice then quickly gave up. Geronamid was speaking and he needed to know no more than that.

"OK . . ." He nodded towards Garp. "What are you doing to him?"

"Downloading information to my evidential submind," Geronamid replied.

"Inadmissible evidence in a Banjer court and irrelevant after the Polity amnesty comes into effect, so why are you doing it?"

"Curiosity. In my position wouldn't you want to know?"

"Yes . . . What do you intend to do to Garp? Your seizure of him was illegal you know."

"I will do nothing to him, and my seizure of him was not illegal."

"He committed a crime here. He killed that acrobat. Surely he's the province of the Banjer police."

The allosaur jerked its head up from the remains of its meal and abruptly paced toward Salind. He had to suppress the urge to turn and run. Now, the voice issued from its bloody mouth. "The acrobat was called Houdini Friend. My friend."

"OK," said Salind, swallowing dryly. "But that still doesn't change – "

Geronamid interrupted. "The reif committed no crime as it is just an artefact which, since the recent seizure of Garp's remaining estate, has become the property of the Banjer government. The reif is under a destruction order and will duly be handed over for incineration."

"I note you refer only to 'the reif' and not to Garp. What about him? You accused him of murder yourself."

"The murderer is whoever loaded the subversion programme into him. He had no knowledge of what he was doing," Geronamid replied.

"Surely that is evidence you could pass on to the police?"

"Why?"

"So the real murderer can be caught," Salind suggested.

"You have been here for two weeks, and have learned nothing in that time?"

"I have not unlearned the necessity of due process, of . . ." Salind trailed off as the allosaur turned away, apparently losing interest in him. It looked at Garp.

"Ah, praist," said the AI.

"Why am I here?" Salind asked, feeling at once foolish and angry.

"Worlds must join the Polity of their own free will. There must be no hint of coercion. Eighty per cent of the population must vote for entry. That's eighty per cent of the *entire* population."

"Yes, I am aware of the charter." Salind struggled to keep his face straight.

"Voting on most worlds is through net encryption – absolute anonymity, your vote registered by the click of a button."

"Polling stations," said Salind, getting some hint of where Geronamid was leading.

"Yes: polling stations. The government of Banjer managed to foist polling stations on us. Their argument being that five per cent of the population is without net access. We estimate that probably forty per cent of the population will be too frightened to vote."

"So there'll be a void result. Why then are you here?"

"In some cases Polity intervention is allowed: humanitarian disaster, cases when widespread corruption in the governing authorities can be proven, and when widespread coercion is being used."

Salind felt his scalp crawling. "Are you saying that the Polity intends to intervene here?"

"That can be hugely damaging unless sufficiently justified. Such tactics can lead to rebellion against the 'AI Autocrat of Earth' and not necessarily on the world on which we have intervened."

Salind stared at the allosaur for a long moment as he chewed over that euphemistic word 'intervention', then shook his head in annoyance – he'd been trying to read the creature's expression.

"What do you intend, then?"

"My overall intentions I will make available to the free press when I am ready."

"Then why the hell am I here?"

"You are here because you were first onto the story of Garp and because he wants you to know the rest of it." The allosaur swung towards the reif. "You see, there is no evidence that Soper was responsible for loading the subversion program into his aug, but there is plenty of proof available of her other crimes. Should you choose not to broadcast this conversation and so alert her, you can go with him to obtain this proof. Conveniently, Soper will be visiting one of her praist factories in a few days' time – one of eight hundred such places run by the Tronad."

There it was: *justification*. Geronamid had not admitted the Polity intended intervention here, but the hint stood as wide as a barn door.

The allosaur swung back to Salind. "It is well to remember that if not Soper, then certainly someone in the Tronad ordered the assassination attempt on me. Not because they thought it might succeed, but because the attempt in itself would bring home to the ruling council here on Banjer just how vulnerable they are and so stiffen their resolve to keep the Polity out."

The Tronad was the main power here, not the Council?

Salind said, "But you are sending Garp for destruction."

Geronamid paced away and swung round with his snout poised over the reif. "Garp is not there," he said, then swinging his snout towards the blank Golem, "Garp is there."

Salind turned to study the Golem. While behind him it had plugged a thick optic cable into a socket in the side of its chest. Now its stance was different. It held out its skeletal grey hands to stare at them, then it gazed across at Geronamid.

"Garp was running fully in his augmentation because viable brain tissue was being destroyed by his praist addiction. He is now a hundred per cent uploaded to this Golem," said Geronamid.

Salind could feel his stomach turning over and over. His fortune was made. What a story! He had enough already to get his contract picked up by one of the Earth networks. Hell, he could even get investment for his own network. He watched as Geronamid swung its head back towards the reif.

"The reif will go for incineration as per the Council's request," the AI said.

"About time," said Garp the Golem.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me. Obviously I was wrong about this Garp character and his relationship to you. I'm not afraid of admitting to error. You'll have heard that my story has been withdrawn from the net?" Salind kept smiling as he studied the apartment. Soper was obviously a woman of baroque tastes. The place was full of preruncible furnishings and frankly strange decorations. He brought his attention finally back to the woman herself.

Deleen Soper bore the appearance of a sixteen-year old girl – a sure sign she'd been using some of the less sophisticated

rejuvenation treatments. She sported short-cropped blond hair over elfin features and wore jeans and a check shirt. Her whole persona seemed that of a pretty farm girl from some half-forgotten age. Salind knew her to be a hundred and forty-three years old, and allegedly responsible for the deaths of hundreds directly, and tens of thousands indirectly through the drug praist. He kept on smiling.

"Leave us, Turk," she said, and gave an airy wave of her hand.

The butler character, who had accompanied Salind from the front door all the way up the spiralling stairs of the building, gave a wooden nod and departed. Salind guessed that the man's duties probably included more than butlering – he looked as if he could crush rocks in his armpits.

"Please, take a seat Mr Salind," she said.

"My pleasure."

Salind sat and watched her walk to an antique drinks cabinet and fill two small cups from a silver teapot.

"Tea?"

He nodded. Now was a good a time as any to try the stuff. She placed the drinks on an occasional table and sat in the armchair opposite.

"Please, conduct your interview," she said.

Salind picked up the warm cup and sipped the drink. It tasted bitter and salty, then left an aftertaste of avocados. Like most of the preferred drinks of humankind it was an acquired taste.

"What was your relationship with Inspector Garp?" he asked as he placed his cup back down on the table. "I'd like to hear your side of things."

"It is a shame you did not think of that before you released your first story."

Her expression, for a moment, had gone flat and characterless.

"Again, I apologise . . . "

Soper switched on a smile and began to talk. "We had, for a brief time, a liaison. I finished it because it became evident he expected more from the relationship than I was prepared to give."

"Like what exactly?"

Soper waved her hand at her surroundings. "I am a wealthy woman. My family has made a fortune from our bangroves. Garp wanted some of that and I was not prepared to give. I do not like fortune hunters. When he realised my position he then started to make accusations."

"He accused you of dealing in praist and being connected to the Tronad?"

Soper leant forward. "Ridiculous of course. Why should I deal in praist? I have no need of the money."

"His contention was that your family has always dealt in praist, that you made a fortune from it which you are now investing in legitimate businesses."

"I thought you were here to listen to my side?"

That flat and dead look again.

"I'm sorry. Do go on."

"My family have owned bangroves for centuries and our fortune grew from them." She gestured to the drink before Salind, who took up the cup and drank again. This time the mouthful he took seemed more satisfying.

Soper continued, "Praist is a drug dealt in by a small minority of the criminal element of Banjer. We have always been leaders here and the holders of moral . . . "

As she went on Salind accessed Argus.

Salind picked up the warm cup and sipped the drink. It tasted bitter and salty, then left an aftertaste of avocados. Like most of the preferred drinks of humankind it was an acquired taste



Praist statistics please.

Fifteen per cent of the population are praist users. That is approximately eighty million people. It is at the root of seventy-three per cent of all crimes committed here and ninety-two per cent of all suicides. It is speculated that terminal praist users will be the first to vote for Polity subsumption because of advanced Polity medical technologies. There is no cure for praist addiction here, and most praist users – those who do not commit suicide – are killed before the drug kills them. In the last year of addiction – addiction lasts eight solstan years – the user becomes psychotic.

More than tens of thousands, then.

As the interview drew to a close Salind felt it less and less difficult to keep smiling. He found himself starting to see that maybe Garp had not told him all of the truth. Deleen Soper did not seem quite so monstrous face-to-face.

"I understand," he said to Soper's latest contention. "A cop in his position could manipulate anything. Coming from the Polity we tend to forget how much power such a police force can wield."

"There, you see?"

Soper sat back and sipped her drink. Salind sipped his own. It had been topped up twice. Perhaps it was going to his head.

"What do you think of my collection?" Soper asked him.

"I think it's wonderful, Deleen."

Soper stood. "But you haven't seen it all."

As he also stood, Salind felt a dizziness wash through him. He blinked and seemed to see rainbow haloes around various objects in the room. Soper conducted him around the apartment. She told him about the grandfather clock replicated about an original pendulum, and showed him carvings from banoak coral that would not have looked out of place in a pharoah's tomb. She showed him lurid paintings and boasted of their value. Then she finally came to her most prized possession.

The drowning jar had been the favoured punishment for criminals in the early years of the Theocracy. Criminals were sealed inside to drown in the preservative the jar contained. This one was a fat urn-shape standing four feet high. The man, still inside the jar, she told him, was the predecessor of the Banjer reifs, but from the wrong side of the law. She giggled and he laughed with her – surprised at how easily the laughter came. The man, with his bulbous eyes and protruding tongue, shifted and scratched at the inside of the jar. He looked like the reporter who had stood behind Merril in the arrivals lounge. Next, the butler was opening the street door for Salind, and he then walked under a sky that was a sheet of skin flayed from the back of a giant. He stood on a bridge and gripped the rail, his mouth dry and bitter and terror rising up inside him. The drowned man was coming to drag him back to the jar and there to pull him down into a clammy embrace. And now Geronamid stood over him with treels oozing out of holes in its allosaur body. Salind started screaming, and didn't stop until a hydrocar pulled up and Geoff leapt out to press a pressure hypodermic against his neck. Then he blacked out. It took him a day to recover from the praist-based hallucinogen. And of course there was no proof that Deleen Soper had administered the drug.

Salind woke, instantly and with crawling horror suffusing him. It was in the middle of the night so Argus must have woken him with a betawave stim. He still wanted coffee though. He still had a hangover from the drug and still occasionally heard fingernails scratching against glass.

"What is it? You know I've had a tiring day," he said, sitting upright on the futon.

Geoff is on his way round to pick you up. His message is: 'Remember the hack and slash job?' There is also an untraced message: 'Cremation complete, will join you shortly.'

"Yes," Salind hissed, standing and heading for the hotel minibar. He took out an Instacup, pulled the tab on it, and by the time he had dressed the beverage was hot. Taking it with him he quickly left his hotel. Standing on the pavement under a leaden sky backlit by green moonlight, he sipped coffee until the hydrocar pulled up.

"Give me bad news or good news, but give me news," he said as he got in beside Geoff.

"It's news, whether it's bad or good is something for you to decide," said the staffer. "Oh, here, I have something for you."

Salind took the small container Geoff handed him, clicked out a pill and swallowed it with a mouthful of coffee. He tossed the empty cup out of the window. "Tell me."

"We're going to the Groves. Our trusty police force have found Merril Torson."

"How . . . ?"

"Oh, the usual way when the Tronad wants to make a point."

They had nailed her to a banoak. The treels were in her clothing, peaking from holes in her arms and stomach. A knot of intestines hung from one such hole. Floodlights, and the red and green flashing lights on the squad cars, cast the scene in a lurid glow. The uniformed cops stood by their cars drinking tea from small flasks while awaiting senior officers.

"She was a hack," said Salind. "But this is excessive punishment."

"The Tronad don't know the meaning of the word excess," said Geoff, as they both stepped out onto the gravel.

"So this is how they hit people?" Salind gazed slowly from side to side, making sure Argus was getting everything here and transmitting it.

"This was how traitors were killed by the underground before the civil war, and it's now how the Tronad kill people when they want to make a point. The holes were made by whoever nailed her there. The treels have to be pushed inside before they try to feed. They just keep grinding away and pushing through in search of banoak flesh. She probably died when one of them hit an artery. It can take anything from ten minutes to an hour."

"You're very well-informed."

"We all are here. This is what happens to you if you piss off the Tronad. This is why very few people will turn out to vote next Moonday."

They moved away from the car and closer to the crucified reporter. Salind felt sorry for Merril and a little sad, but nothing more than that. She wouldn't have suffered. Were they so primitive here they didn't realise she could have shut off the pain with her aug?

"Alright there. Keep back," said one of the uniformed cops as he strolled over.

Salind turned to him. "What's happened here, officer?"

"You got eyes ain't you?"

"A murder I take it. I think you should be aware that I know the victim."

"Who don't? We know whose toes she stepped on," said the cop, turning to inspect the corpse.

"So we can be expecting an arrest soon then?" said Salind.

The cop snorted then glanced over as another car pulled up. "Yeah, there'll be an arrest. Some other toe-stepper'll get shat on. And here comes the biggest shitter of 'em all."

Salind also watched as Callus and two of his thugs climbed from the car. Behind the car a van pulled up. He supposed that here must be Banjer's equivalent of a medical examiner or some such. He started to move in their direction, but Geoff caught hold of his shoulder.

"Not a good idea. Best to just watch," he said.

"I only want to ask a reasonable question or two," said Salind.

"Don't," said Geoff. "Callus is never in his best mood when he's clearing up after Soper. It won't just be a slap next time. It'll be a stiletto in your back followed by polite enquiries after your health for the benefit of your aug recording."

Salind desisted. He turned to the uniformed cop. "You realise her augmentation will have recorded everything she saw?"

The cop glanced at him and shook his head. "That won't be much then."

The man walked back to join his companions. On closer inspection Salind saw Merril's eyes had been gouged out. A treel worked its way out of one socket. Salind took out his pill container, clicked out a pill, and swallowed it dry.

From the van, two overalled figures bearing a stretcher approached the banoak. They conducted no forensic examination of the area, no careful search for evidence. After they deposited the stretcher on the ground, one of them took a crowbar from his belt and levered out the nails pinning the corpse to the tree. When it slid to the ground the two rolled it in a plastic sheet, then passed a heating unit over it to shrink and seal it. As they carried the neat parcel back to the van, Salind could still see treels moving about inside. Callus spotted him and started walking over, his thugs and two uniformed policemen in tow.

"We'd better be leaving," said Geoff.

"I don't think so," said Salind.

"I've warned you. That's all I can do."

"Fine," said Salind, but he did step back to put himself up against the car.

Callus came up before him and his two thugs moved round to either side of the Inspector. They stood with their hands clasped before them. Salind had seen that pose before from other people who served the same purpose on other worlds – immediate testicle protection.

"Well, well, Mr Salind, what do you have to say for yourself?"

Salind was momentarily distracted from replying, for another car had pulled up. The third plain-clothed cop who stepped out seemed familiar. Someone in the Tronad probably – someone about whom Salind had read a file. Was this one of Soper's associates? He looked the part, being a shaven-headed thug with slightly more muscle than necessary.

"Sorry . . . what?"

Callus went on, "I suppose it was professional jealousy that made you do it."

"Oh shit," said Geoff.

Callus glanced at him. "I imagine your accomplice will be able to tell us."

"You have got to be kidding," said Salind.

"I'll need your aug for evidence of course."

Now the two thugs moved up on either side of Salind.

"My aug is internal and backs up to the Tarjen AI every four minutes. It doesn't retain a recording itself, but that backed-up information will prove I was nothing to do with this."

Shit, get me some help out here. This fucker is going to kill me.

Message received: the legal department is onto it right now.

I don't need the legal department! I need Polity Monitors!

Polity Monitors do not have jurisdiction here.

Callus smiled. "Here on Banjer we are aware how it is possible to interfere with computer-stored information."

"Argus is encryption-sealed! Nothing less than a major AI could interfere with it! And it's internal – you haven't got the facilities here to remove it!"

Callus gave the nod to his two thugs. "Mr Gem Salind, in the name of the Banjer Council I arrest you for the murder of Merril Torson, and with the powers vested in me by said Council, seize all evidential material. Please do not resist arrest."

A fist like the bony end of a ham crashed into the side of Salind's head. He slid along the car and the second thug hook-punched him twice in the gut.

"I said *please do not resist arrest* Mr Salind."

Hazily he realised just what they intended. He would either die whilst resisting arrest or when they attempted to remove Argus. Case closed.

For a little fat guy Geoff could move very fast. He had jumped up on the bonnet of the car and slammed his recorder down on the second attacker's head before Salind thought to react. Salind punched the one on his right then fervently wished he'd used his boot. That ham-fist came down again and the next thing he knew he was lying dazedly on the floor watching Geoff, his face covered with blood, being held by the scruff of the neck and having his head repeatedly pounded against the car's wing.

"That's enough!" someone bellowed.

Salind tried to stand as his attacker loomed over him. He saw the shaven headed one moving up behind. Shavehead took hold of the thug by the shoulder and just threw him. The man hit the car then the ground, bounced and lay still. The second thug released Geoff in time to walk into a backhander that lifted him clean over the car. Salind staggered groggily to his feet. He glanced back and saw the two uniformed officers standing dumbfounded. Callus was on his knees holding his wrist. He looked up as Shave-head came up beside Salind, and real fear twisted his features. Scrabbling inside his coat he produced a nasty looking pulse-gun.

"You gonna do it to me, Mikey?" asked Shavehead.

Callus did. The pulse-gun flashed. There came a thud and a burst of smoke from Shavehead's chest.

"I just love this body." Shavehead strode forward and drove his fist down into Callus's face.

Salind felt that familiar churning in his stomach: one hell of a story and now he knew the punch line, so to speak. One of the uniformed officers drew his own weapon – a similar pulse-gun to Callus's.

"Drake, put that away will you," said Shavehead.

The cop looked at his weapon in bewilderment, then he holstered it.

"Inspector Garp," he said.

With Argus now set to record only, Salind observed, "So that's how you looked."

The uniformed police had been in disarray, and let them leave without protest, though Salind wondered what they could have done to stop them with their ex-boss, firmly uploaded to a Golem chassis, there to facilitate matters.

"Yeah," said Garp, "ten years ago. Geronamid managed to piece together enough information to have this made." Garp touched his face and chest.

They sat in Garp's car, Geoff in the back holding a medpatch to his head and groaning sporadically.

"When I looked like this I was the big man who was a big pain to the Tronad. Callus was my partner until Soper bought him off. I think he slipped praist into my tea."

"He won't be doing that again," said Salind.

Garp gave him a slightly disinterested glance. Salind wondered if he was fully aware of the capabilities of the body he now occupied. He'd checked on Callus and the two others while Garp spoke to the uniformed officers. Callus and the one behind the car had been dead. The third thug had not been far from it.

They dropped Geoff at the Tarjen offices.

"I'm gonna keep my head down now. Soper is not going to sit on her hands after this. She'll want us all nailed to banoaks," Geoff said, and with that disappeared inside.

"What now?" Salind asked. Without thinking he took out his pill container and clicked out a pill. Garp's hand clamped on his wrist and the pill fell to the floor. Salind fought the grip, suddenly unreasonably angry.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Garp asked.

Salind stared at him. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck rising. He was sure someone was scratching on the glass behind him.

"I . . . They're to stop me . . ."

"I know what they are. How long have you been a user?"

"Soper dosed me when I interviewed her. Didn't you see that on the net?"

"So, a few days. She used pure derivative?"

"I don't know."

"Nightmares during the day?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. You're on fifteen strength. You're already at the level of a seven-year addict. You're losing it already."

"I'll get a detoxicant treatment when this is over."

"Be sure you do or I'll off you myself."

Garp released his hand. Salind picked up the pill from the floor and quickly swallowed it. The feeling, like a looming wave of black chaos ready to fall on him, slowly receded. Not taking the next needed dose was unthinkable, as he had briefly seen how thin was the veneer over reality for him. Garp started the car and pulled away.

The ceramal mesh fence stood three metres high, carried a killing current and sported beam break alarms set along the top. Beyond it, banoaks stretched up the hill in neat rows. Between the rows the ground seemed in constant motion and, in the distance, a disk-shaped vacuum harvester, towing a collection tanker, worked its way down.

"They must have to empty those tankers quite often," said Salind.

"Not as often as you might think. That's a Massey Vacpress. It sucks up the treels, presses out the juice and shoots the pressings into the tanker – almost pure treelskin."

As it drew closer Salind observed the waste juice pouring from pipes in the side of the harvester. The machine left the ground behind it completely clear of treels, but there were plenty yet to be sucked up. This had to be the first run of the morning. A driver sat in a bucket seat on the main harvester disk steering it with two levers. He wore blue armoralls and a sphere helmet.

"Why that gear?" he asked.

"The helmet's to prevent narcosis from the vapour, and it's their uniform."

"Whose?"

"Soper's people."

Salind nodded and wondered what the hell they were going to do now. No way were they going to get through that fence without setting off a mass of alarms, even if they managed not to fry themselves. "Boring job," he said, nodding at the driver. "That'll be one to go with the Polity running things. They'll stick a submind in the harvester and that'll be that."

"OK, let's go," said Garp.

They stepped out of the car and Garp popped the boot. From it he removed his rail gun and walked over to the fence. The red sun breaking over the horizon cast his shadow behind him. He held the weapon out of view and waved. The driver raised a hand in return and continued down the row. Some minutes later the harvester neared the fence. Salind couldn't figure what Garp intended. Was he going to hold up the harvester? Garp showed him. As the machine reached the point where it had to turn to go down the next row Garp raised his weapon and fired a short burst. The driver disappeared in a cloud of red.

"Jesu! What the hell are you doing!"

Garp glanced at him. "Well you said he'd be redundant."

"You just killed him!"

"Yeah, I did didn't I. Come here."

He took hold of Salind's shoulder and walked him to one side. Salind felt himself shaking. He'd seen some horrible things, but he'd never seen someone killed in such cold blood. The harvester kept going, from where it should have turned, and crashed into the fence. Electricity shorted through its body as it tore out a hundred metre length of fencing and dragged it into the highway. Hitting the bank on the other side of the road it ground to a halt, its vacuum still roaring. Salind saw that the driver was still sitting in the bucket seat, though only from the waist down.

"You killed him," he repeated.

"They all know what's going on in here. You've seen nothing yet. Come on, we've got to move fast now. The guards'll be here soon."

Garp led him back to the car and started it up. He carefully drove it off-road and through the gap made by the harvester. Then he floored the accelerator and the turbine soon had them up to a hundred kloms up the cleared lane between the banoaks.

"They always come at a breach from the outside. We'll be too far in by then for them to do anything about us," said Garp.

"What about getting out?" asked Salind.

"I shouldn't worry unduly about that."

In a few minutes they reached the end of the grove and Garp dumped the car in an irrigation ditch. He gave it one shove to get it there, leaving a dent in the metal.

"You still recording?" he asked as he checked his rail gun.

"Yes," said Salind, wondering if that was the right thing to say.

"Good. Let's go take a look at the factory." He hung the gun at his belt and turned his back to Salind. Looking over his shoulder he said, "Hop on."

This being his first piggyback ride on the back of a psychotic Golem android, Salind did not know what to expect. He swore, after they covered four or five kilometres, it would be his last. In minutes they reached rocky terrain cut through by gravel roads. Banoaks grew in wild profusion here, with a low scrub of adapted thyme and spherule grass below them. On the higher ground the banoaks were bigger and older than in the grove. Perhaps they had been growing since before humans arrived on Banjer.

How long do they live?

Oaks on the north continent have been dated at over five thousand years in age.

Garp peered at him, and he wondered if the ex-policeman could listen in on these aug conversations. Garp pointed to a ring of pots strapped round one of the nearby oaks. "Sap drains. You'll see how they use the sap in a bit. Still recording?"

"Yes," Salind replied, prepared to give no more than that. He dry-swallowed another praist pill before following where Garp led. Soon they came to a rise overlooking a sprawl of warehouses. Garp pointed to the four trucks parked before the largest building.

"See, they're unloading cropsters," he explained.

Salind's vision did not extend so far, for he did not have a Golem's eyes. He could just about see some activity.

Argus, give me a visual feedback, magnification x10.

Processing.

After a moment his vision flickered and suddenly he could view the scene up close. Trussed in straight jackets and with bags over their heads, people were being led from the trucks. One of them tried to run and soon fell flat on his face. The men doing the unloading, men dressed in armoralls like those worn by the one Garp had killed, stood laughing. Then one of them walked over to the fallen man and proceeded to beat him with a length of wood, only desisting when one of his companions called to him. He then dragged his victim to his feet and with more blows drove him back to the rest.

Cut feedback.

Salind's vision returned to normal. "What the hell is going on down there?" he asked.

"They're all people who've done something to piss off Soper or one of her lieutenants. Or they're other disposable members of society. It's noticeable how few occupants our asylums and gaols have," replied Garp.

"What are they going to do to them?"

"That's what you're here to see. Come on."

Using banoak copses, scattered boulders, and the occasional natural gully as cover they worked their way closer to the buildings. Salind worried about the footprints they were leaving in the spherule grass as its little glassy bubbles burst under their feet, until he looked back and saw how quickly the footprints faded. When they were within a hundred metres of the main building Garp stopped in a low gully.

"Wait here. I'll be back in a few minutes."

True to his word Garp soon returned. He carried two pairs of armoralls and two helmets. The helmet with a crack in it dripped blood. Salind selected the other one.

Garp told him, "Just follow me and keep your mouth shut. You're going to see some pretty horrible things in there. Don't react. These people see it every day."

"Can I start transmitting now?"

Garp glanced over to where a long and expensive-looking hydrocar was parked. "Yeah, I reckon so. She's only got access to the Polity networks back in the city, and by the time she finds out it'll be too late."

With some relief Salind turned his aug's transmitter back on.

They pulled on the armoralls, Salind trying not to notice his were still warm. Climbing from the gully, to one side of the main building, they headed towards the doors. Those unloading the cropsters did not notice them for a moment. When they did, Garp raised his hand and continued walking. A hand was raised in return, but they were otherwise ignored. Salind just kept his head down and his teeth gritted. He'd just seen the previous possessors of the armoralls lying in a drainage ditch. Passing the trucks, they entered the building. Salind tried to ignore the crying from inside one truck.

Message from Jennifer Tarjen: 'Great job, Salind. You're live on Earthnet right now!'

Somehow Salind couldn't get excited about that. He wondered how the Polity citizens were reacting to what he was seeing right now. Inside the building a group of three men were strapping cropsters to frames. They had it down to a fine art: no one escaped. After the victims were in place, two women went down the rows pulling bags from heads and pushing metal devices into the cropster's mouths. Salind supposed those devices were to stop them biting through the tubes that were then forced down into their stomachs.

"Sap from the banoaks," said Garp. "It takes an hour or so to reach sufficient concentration in the bloodstream."

Salind jumped when he heard an agonised scream from deeper in the building.

"That was a cropster whose sap levels just reached sufficient concentration," said Garp.

"What the hell are they doing here?"

Garp explained, "It was some lunatic ancestor of Soper's who first drank tea made from the treels that had fed on an enemy he had nailed to a banoak. He discovered that tea to be powerful indeed. He had discovered the human-specific narcotic, praist. In his subsequent gruesome experiments he also discovered that treels live longer in victims who like their tea too much, and that in those cases the yield of praist increases."

Deeper in the building Garp abruptly halted and gestured ahead. Here an old grey-bearded man, who Salind thought resembled the park labourer he had observed before meeting Garp the reif, was doing something to one of those strapped to a frame. It took a moment for Salind to absorb this further horror. The woman on the frame was unconscious. The old man cut slits in her body and opened them with sprung clamps. Into the holes, through a wide funnel, he fed finger-length treels.

"During the later years of the cult of Anubis Arisen it was discovered that if you fed someone on pure banoak sap to get a sufficient concentration in the bloodstream, and if the treels are inserted just so, they will attach quickly without causing too much internal damage – without hitting an artery. Allowed to

grow in a sap-fed human body for as much as five days the yield of praist is fifty times more than when it was done the old way. The victim dies eventually, as you can see." Garp gestured down the row of frames to where corpses hung, larger treels writhing in and out of holes in their bodies.

"This is a nightmare," said Salind, and for once he wasn't thinking about the story. He thought about what Geronamid had said: *eight hundred* of these places.

Garp nodded, then unhooked his rail gun and handed it across. "Protect yourself."

"What?"

"I intend to use my hands," said Garp, and walked over to the old man. The man looked up, grinning, for he obviously enjoyed his work. Garp reached out and pressed his hands to either side of the man's face, then twisted. Salind could hear the bones breaking from where he stood. Now Garp turned and headed back, passing Salind without looking at him as he headed for the building's entrance. Salind turned and followed. Reaching the first of the women, Garp chopped once and she went down. The next woman went down the same way. The first two of the three men strapping people to the frames, Garp grabbed and slammed together. They dropped soggily. The third man tried to run.

Message from Jennifer Tarjen: 'Polity Monitors coming in through the runcible and two gamma-class dreadnoughts in orbit. Geronamid has ordered immediate intervention on Banjer! This has to be because of your transmission!'

Like hell, thought Salind. Geronamid had intended intervention here from the start, Salind's transmission being just part of the justification.

What's Geronamid doing now?

Message: Geronamid cannot be traced at present.

Garp caught the third man by his collar, dragged him back and broke his neck. He was going to do them all. He just wasn't going to stop. Then there came a turquoise flash that left afterimages on Salind's retina. He saw Garp fly back, his clothing and skin burning. He hit the ground hard then immediately sat up. Deleen Soper walked in from outside, three men in armoralls walking in behind her.

"It was obvious you'd been uploaded to a Golem," she said. "And typically arrogant of you to consider yourself invulnerable." She held up her weapon and went on. "This is Polity hardware. It will stop a Golem, as you've just found out."

Garp began to chuckle, then to laugh.

"It amuses you that you are finally going to die?" she asked.

From where he was hiding behind a row of frames Salind shakily raised the rail gun. He had to do something; had to commit. He couldn't just observe.

"I've already done that. It's not something that scares me," Garp replied.

"It's a shame you can't be put on a frame," said Soper.

"Nothing you can do but destroy me. You can't even use me for some idiot assassination attempt this time. You might have got your hands on a fancy gun, but no way you've got the tech to access Golem hardware."

Soper leant the weapon across her shoulder and gazed down at Garp. "No point in that now. The fact that I could get an assassin through all the Council's defences brought most of them back into line. I also gained the unexpected bonus of making Mr straight and true officer Garp kill an innocent Polity citizen."

Salind could feel sweat running down his back. This was it: he could delay no longer.

Message: Salind, put the gun down before you shoot your own foot off.

Who the hell?

Just then he felt Argus go offline, but it wasn't him that had made it do so.

Garp now began to rise.

"Stay on the fucking ground!"

"Polity hardware," said Garp, continuing to stand. "Had you the opportunity I know that you would have some strong words for your supplier."

Soper aimed her weapon at him and pulled the trigger, again and again. Nothing happened. Salind could see first confusion then terror growing in her expression. Her three accompanying thugs were backing off, ready to run. He tried the record facility in Argus – that didn't work either. On his feet now, Garp held his hands apart before him.

"Don't worry about me, Deleen. I'm not going to kill you." For a moment she found hope, then Garp gestured to the doorway behind, which now filled with a huge shape. "He's going to do that."

Soper and her three thugs turned. Salind stepped out to see more clearly as Geronamid, still in the form of an allosaur, stepped delicately into the building.

For a moment, stillness, then Soper laughed with relief and tossed her weapon on the floor. "You can't do that. You're an AI. It's against all Polity law."

"Whatever gave you that idea?" asked Geronamid, pacing forward.

"You can't interfere in places where that law doesn't apply, and if it ever does apply here there'll be a general amnesty."

"Who said anything about law?" Geronamid asked. "But since you mention it. Amnesty doesn't apply in cases of intervention."

"What?"

Geronamid stepped in closer. Salind thought Soper must smell the last meal on the allosaur's breath. What happened next was nightmarish. Geronamid's head snapped to one side and one of Soper's men fell over. His head was gone. Geronamid spat the head at Soper's feet.

"I think I would like you to run now."

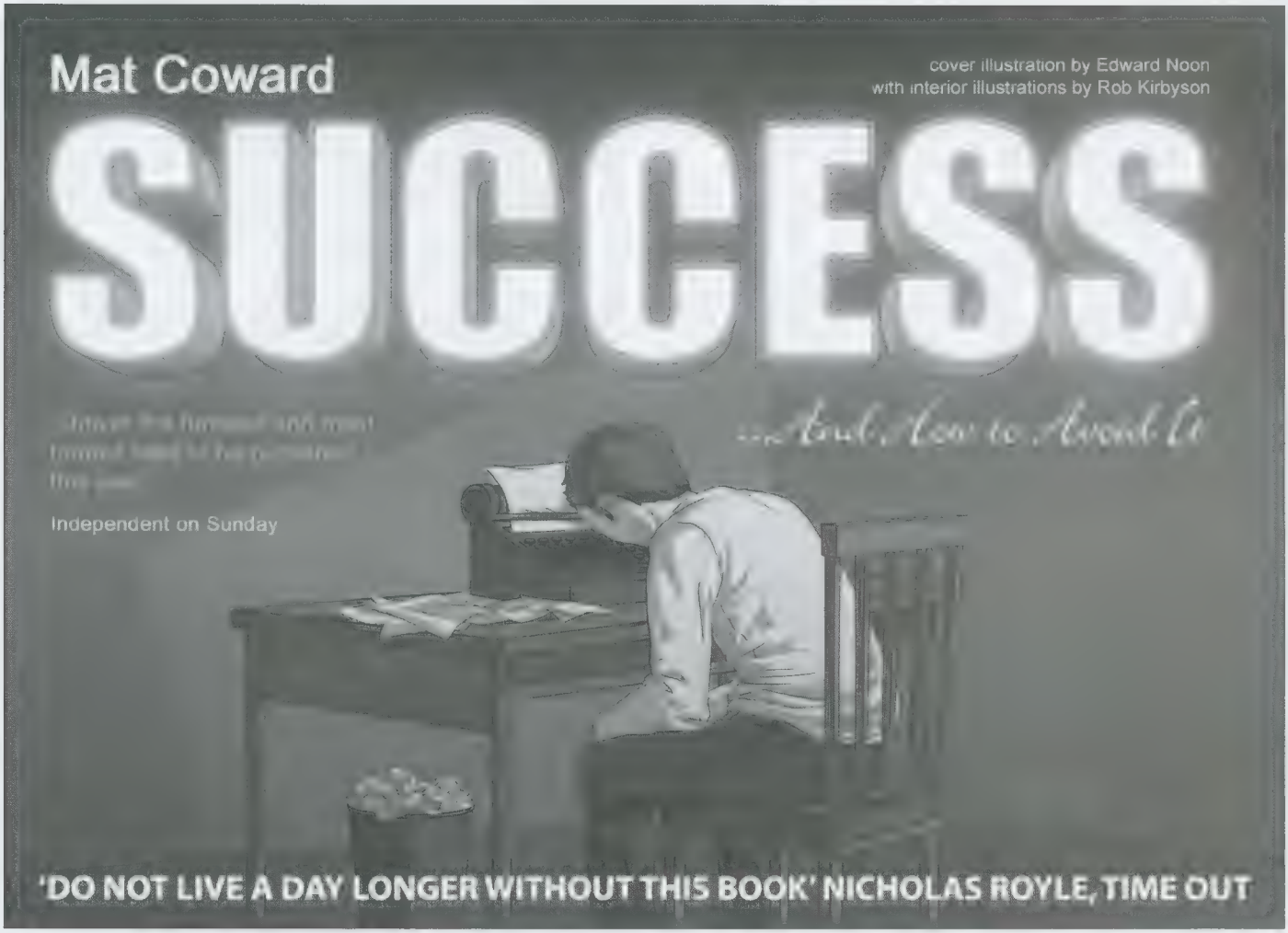
Soper stared at the head for one interminable moment, then turned and fled, her men quickly following her. Salind understood now why Argus was totally offline. The AI had remotely shut it down: no recordings, no transmission. He watched the allosaur take off after the three and disbelievingly watched what happened in the shadowy interior of the building. No one would believe this: Polity AIs were just so measured and moral.

Breathing ash out of his burnt mouth Garp stepped up beside Salind. "Even AIs can get pissed off when a friend gets killed."

"I guess so," Salind replied, remembering the acrobat.

Soper's scream, the last one, seemed more protracted than that of her two fellows, probably because Geronamid took his time about eating her.

Neal Asher is now on his third three-book contract with Macmillan. *The Voyage of the Sable Keech* will be available in January 2006, and *Polity Agent* is all but complete. More information here: http://freespace.virgin.net/n.asher



There are thousands of books for writers and would-be writers. Some of them are even useful. But a lot more people make a living writing Howtorite books than make a living as a result of them. The 'How To Make A Million With Your Pen In Four Easy Lessons' guide is part of a huge, rich, somewhat distasteful industry, based on two well-known facts about human nature:

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STORIES>SUNSET BY JAY CASELBERG>ILLUSTRATED BY JESSE SPEAK

We stood for a few moments, hand in hand, watching the sun slip down beneath the horizon like an acquiescence to the night's cool purple, taking the day's fire and anger with it. Benefis was like that – all full of hot rage during the day, but with a night that wrapped itself around you like a cool blanket, soothing and forgiving. We stayed for a few minutes more, watching as the sky turned from reddish purple to velvet dark. God knows, you needed something to hold on to on Benefis, even if it was only each other. Somewhere off in the darkness, in what passed for trees in that place, sharp clacking rose and drifted. From other spots around us, others picked up the achitic's cries. Night on Benefis was closing in.

We'd had a Rex crash through the barriers about four nights ago, so we were nervous and rightly so. All teeth and spines, the things were a nightmare vision, especially lumbering through the darkness. But then, we'd also had a song ship come through a week ago, so the night terrors had been eased by the little pieces of luxury that still remained.

For some reason, grapes wouldn't take on Benefis. Not that we had the set up to make wine, if they had. I leaned back against the balcony railing and took a slow, deep breath through my nose, drinking in the rich tannins of an Earth far away, watching Sondra over the lip of my glass. "This is the last of it," I said to her. "We'd better make the most of it."

She tilted her glass in my direction, and then brought it back to her face, breathing the overlay of fruits that we'd never see. "I love you, Max," she said, the words barely audible, her shy smile almost hidden in the fading light.

As she lifted the glass to her lips, I smiled back, holding the look for a couple of seconds as I watched her, then turned my attention to my own glass.

We didn't know when the next song ship would be through, if ever.

Self-sustaining colony. Make or break.

We'd almost made it. Almost. It had taken us twenty years to find the definition of almost. And now, it was too late.

Maybe it would have been different if we owned the song ships, but we didn't, and we had nothing that they really wanted. The few things that they managed to drop off to us were like disaster relief, in a way. Not food, not medicine, no. But disaster all the same. Even if they had managed to get us off, the voyage would have been too long, not that the song ships were equipped to carry our sort anyway. Sometimes, hope is cruel.

The funny thing is, you never give up. Not if there's someone there to share it with you.

Inside, through the open window, Joshua gurgled. Just for now, we tried to ignore the sound, turning instead to the dark streaked sky. Sondra cupped her wine glass in front of her chest with both hands, pretending, but I could see the firm set of her lips and the slight narrowing of her eyes.

I moved around her, and put my arm around her waist, placing my palm against the flat of her stomach, and buried my face in her neck. I still loved the smell of her, up close like this.

"Mmmm," she said. And for a few moments, the memory of what sat inside stood apart from us.



We'd had a Rex crash through the barriers about four nights ago, so we were nervous and rightly so. All teeth and spines, the things were a nightmare vision, especially lumbering through the darkness

JAY CASELBERG SUNSET

How do you define humanity? Who owns the definition? Was Joshua human? We didn't know. Not Joshua, nor any of the other 'children' in the colony. Genetically, they said he was and that he wasn't. And yet, the genes told us other things – things that we maybe didn't want to know.

It's hard to even talk about what he is. It's hard to even think about it and try to analyse what it means, though the temptation is always there. Acceptance is a funny thing.

And we love him, in our own special way. The hardest part of that is that the love is tempered with knowledge. We could have tried for another one, but we'd seen. Others had tried before us. I tried to chase away the thought, as I felt her belly beneath my hand, that her body had betrayed us. It was a thought that wasn't fair.

Joshua gurgled again, and made those mouth noises he's so fond of. I felt Sondra stiffen against me, and I reached up to massage her shoulder. "Hey, hon, it's OK," I said. But both of us knew it wasn't.

She turned, pulling herself from within my grip, and stepped away. "We should probably get inside," she said. "He'll need feeding soon."

Off in the darkness, something lumbered through the brush, vegetation cracking with its weight.

I was out at the site the next day, checking on a pump housing that had been dislodged when one of the packies had gotten through the wire. The hot wind was stirring up the dust, and the sweat was making it stick to everything. About midway through the morning, Toliver, working alongside me, grunted and stood, pulled off his heavy work gloves, banged them together and then shoved them in his belt. Brandon Toliver was a thickset guy, bullish in everything he did. He stood there, fists planted on his hips, an expression of expectation on his ruddy, grime-streaked face. When it was clear I wasn't going to take the bait, he spoke.

"Listen, Max. I've been thinking. Maybe the ships can do something. Maybe they know something."

I stood and pulled down my goggles to let them hang around my neck. "Like what, Brandon? What're they going to do anyway?"

He stared at me for a couple of seconds, processing. "I dunno. It's got to be worth a shot though, right?"

Brandon and Anna were pretty new to it. Their daughter had been born just two months before.

I sighed and ran my fingers back through my hair, matting more dirt mixed with the sweat from my brow into the already grimy strands. "Don't you think we've been through that?" I said. "Don't you think everyone's been through that?"

He stood there for a couple of seconds, his jaw working, and then his gaze dropped.

I had to have some sympathy for the guy. I knew exactly what he and Anna were going through. It was back to that hope thing. I watched as he slowly pulled his gloves back on and crouched down to continue working on the valves. He hadn't reached the point of acceptance yet.

At first, they'd said it was some type of radiation, but then they'd ruled it out and decided that it had to be viral. There was no evidence of it though. No real evidence. You can't cure something if you don't know what causes it. All you can do is deal with the

symptoms and hope it will go away. Well, it wasn't going away, not anytime soon. Still people kept on trying, living with their hope . . . living with all our hope. Humans are a stubborn race.

I slipped my goggles back on and hunched down to continue on the housing. We spent the rest of the morning working, the harsh dry wind driving against us the only sound to break the silence between us. From time to time, I glanced at Toliver, wishing there was something I could say to him to make things better, but as I tested the words inside my head, I knew they'd sound hollow, so instead, I decided to keep them to myself.

By the time we got to cleaning up for the day and packing things away, Brandon hadn't broached the subject again. For now, at least, it seemed he'd keep it to himself. I knew, whatever he ended up deciding, he'd finally reach the place that Sondra and I had reached some months before. Sometimes, it just took a little time. None of us was alone in that.

After packing away, we headed back to the depot together in silence. Once or twice on the way in, Brandon turned to me, appeared to be about to say something, and then changed his mind, turning his attention back to the blasted ground and the rough track back, weaving in and out of the tangle bushes that had crept across our path in the time we'd been out there. I watched him out of the corner of my eye, seeing the muscles working in the side of his jaw, wondering what was going on in his head. I should have known then, but you never think about those things when the time's upon you.

The court case was the first we heard of it, but by then, the word was all through the colony. Not that we had courts in the true sense of the word. There wasn't any real crime on Benefis. Sure, there were petty misdemeanours, perceived wrongs between the colonists, but most of them were settled with a healthy dose of pragmatism. That's how colonies function. Everybody was too interested in making the place a success. We all worked together, not against each other.

How do you define humanity? Who owns the definition? Was Joshua human? We didn't know. Not Joshua, nor any of the other 'children' in the colony



At first, we didn't believe it, couldn't believe the enormity. The implications of what Brandon had done swept far too deep for any of us to really come to terms with them. If Brandon had been smart, he would have claimed a Rex had done it, or any of the indigenous hazards that stalked our landscape, but he didn't. Or maybe he was too smart. I still don't know. There are far too many questions still. Sondra and I, we don't talk about it. Sometimes, I wish she would. She's starting to get weaker now and Joshua is getting stronger.

They set aside the large meeting hall in the centre of town for the trial. Just about everyone who could get there was packed inside, on the pale, long benches. A low buzz circulated along with the fans turning slowly overhead. Sondra and I sat toward the back, not wanting to be associated too closely with proceedings. It was common knowledge that Brandon and I worked together. I just hoped that they weren't going to call me to give evidence. If they did, I didn't know what I was going to say.

Around us, there were snatches of speculation. What would they do if they found him guilty? We didn't have punishment. What were they going to do? Anna as well. What would happen to her? If anything, she had more responsibility in the matter; she was the mother after all. They were both complicit in the act.

I heard the words ebbing and flowing around me and I bit my lip and looked at Sondra, reaching for her hand. She held my gaze, and I knew, within her look lay understanding. She's always been able to read me, see what's going on inside my head. Right at that moment, there were things there that I didn't particularly want her to see.

Gustavson took the podium and gestured for quiet as Brandon and Anna entered and took their seats. Anna was a small, dark woman, quiet, unlike her partner. She glanced nervously around the room and then turned her gaze back down to the hands clasped in her lap. The colony's tall, elderly statesman and chief administrator looked at them for several seconds after they were seated, seemingly not sure of how he should proceed. Finally, he cleared his throat and held up his hands, unnecessarily, as the entire hall was silent, holding their breaths in anticipation.

"I am not quite sure how to proceed," he said after a pause. "This is a circumstance that none of us has faced before. A few of us have gotten together and discussed what we should do, and have decided that it's up to all of us here, and virtually all of us are here, to vote on the matter. We should act according to what's best for the colony, what's best for Benefis. We can think of no other way to do it. Here, in our position, the old ways, traditions, don't really apply and we have to deal with it accordingly."

He scanned the faces and, seeing no objection, continued. "We did not expect to have to face something like this. Life is too valuable for all of us. Every single one of us."

He looked around the room again, as if seeking confirmation in the faces in front of him. Despite myself, I shifted uncomfortably on my seat. "All right," he said. He turned back to face Brandon and Anna. "There are the traditions that work, I suppose . . ." He gave a heavy sigh. "Brandon Toliver, you have been accused of murder. Of the unlawful killing of your daughter, Elsa. It is said that you took the child three nights ago and threw her from the balcony

into the brush surrounding the perimeter. We are not sure if it was the fall or the wildlife that was ultimately responsible for her death."

There was silence and then a murmur through the room. Gustavson stilled it with a wave of his hand. "Regardless of the end cause, it was your actions that caused it. And so, you are rightly accused of murder."

"Define murder," said Brandon quietly from his chair.

This seemed to take Gustavson by surprise, and there was a moment of confusion on his face. "I'm sorry?"

"I said, define murder." He looked up and fixed Gustavson with a hard look.

"Murder. The unlawful taking of another human life."

Toliver was on his feet now. "Define human."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said define human. The unlawful taking of another human life. They're your words." Toliver was becoming flushed and he held his body stiffly. "Answer me."

"A human being. A person. A member of the human race."

"No!" said Toliver, the word exploding from his lips. "That thing wasn't human. None of them are." He swung to face the room. "You know that. You all know that!" He searched the assembled faces. "You," he said pointing. "And you. And you. You know that. Every one of you. Human? Can any of you really say those things are human?"

We didn't want to hear the words. None of us wanted to hear the words.

"For God's sake, man," said Gustavson. "You killed your own baby."

Toliver spun back to face Gustavson. "That thing wasn't our baby. None of them are."

I glanced at Sondra, but she was looking down at her hands, her bottom lip caught between her teeth. She closed her eyes, screwed up her face and put her head back. It looked like she was on the verge of tears, her hands clasped tightly together. I reached across to separate them, but she shook her head. I turned back to the front.

"Sit down, Brandon," said Gustavson quietly, trying to defuse the situation. "Please sit down."

Anna reached up to Brandon's arm and gently drew him down beside her.

Gustavson waited for a couple of moments, making sure that everything was going to remain calm before speaking again. The room was deathly quiet. "If I may continue . . . " he said. "Regardless of what you're saying, you are accused of causing the death of your daughter. Do you admit the act? If you do, then we can go ahead and decide what we must do about it."

Brandon was on his feet again. "Yes, I did it. I killed that thing. I threw it out of the window and I'd do it again. I saw what it was doing to Anna. You all know. Don't deny it. They're parasites. It wasn't my daughter. It wasn't human. I killed it, all right?"

Sondra reached for my hand and gripped it hard.

Again silence, only broken by Gustavson clearing his throat.

"Then, if you admit it, there only remains to – "

"No," said Anna, without looking up.

"Anna?"

"No. You cannot do this."

Gustavson frowned. "What is this, Anna?"

Brandon tried to quiet her, a restraining hand on her shoulder.

"No, Brandon," she said. She turned to face the room. "You can't accuse him. He didn't do it. He's only trying to protect me. I did it. I was the one." She lifted her gaze to meet Gustavson's eyes. "I threw that thing out of the window. Brandon thought that if he took the blame, it would be easier, that he could explain it. But it was me. There's nothing worse than a mother that kills her own baby, he told me. Well, it's true. Except it wasn't a baby. That was never a baby. That . . . thing . . . " She bowed her head, her shoulders wracked with silent sobs. "I couldn't, any more," she said between the tears.

As she had spoken, there had been sharp intakes of breath from more than one place in the room.

"Well," said Gustavson.

A low mutter had grown and faded among the assembled gathering.

Gustavson signalled to someone in the front row – I couldn't tell whom it was – and got them to lead Brandon and Anna out from the hall. Brandon escorted her, his arm round her shoulders, her head bowed. He didn't look back at the room. All his attention was on Anna.

Gustavson waited for a few moments after they had left and their escort had returned. After all, there was nowhere really for them to go.

He gestured for quiet, stilling the ongoing hum of voices. "I suggest we determine what we should do. I will start the discussion by show of hands. And please, please try and keep this ordered. We have some difficult discussions ahead."

The debate went on long into the night and, in the end, it was inconclusive. We resolved to meet and continue the discussions the following morning.

Back at home, I stood in the nursery, staring at Joshua, thinking, as he stared fixedly back from beneath the ridges. Sondra couldn't come into the room with me and stayed out on the balcony until I was done. I fed him and put him to bed, though I knew he wasn't going to be satisfied by that. He was never satisfied unless he had a proper feed.

Brandon and Anna live on the edges of the colony now. No one has much to do with them, as if interacting with them would announce the thoughts that nobody dares to put into words. The trial has come and gone, but it has left us all with questions. Somehow, it's easier not seeing Brandon every day.

Now at night, when we come back inside from watching the sunset, and I see Joshua peering at me with those strange violet eyes, and making those noises with his mouth, I feel a chill, and it's not a chill from the evening air. I look at him, and wonder what he's thinking, if he's thinking at all. There's no way I will ever know. And in those times, I reach for Sondra's hand, knowing that she's the only thing really stopping me from going to places I do not want to go or to think about going. That's enough.

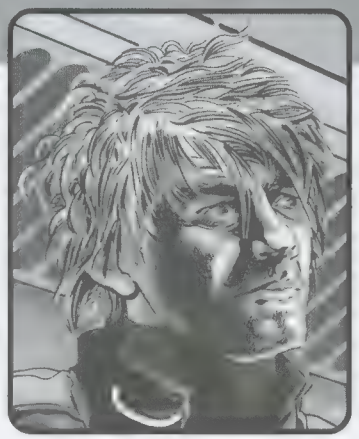
I hear her voice, telling me that she loves me, and for now, that *is* enough. But the thing that really scares me, is that I don't know how long it will remain enough. Brandon and Anna were just the first. There have been others since. Somehow, I think, they're not going to be the last.

In the end, there's no more future for us here. It's just how we choose to live it.

Jay Caselberg's most recent novel is *Metal Sky*, with *The Star Tablet* out in December.


Bird
Songs
at
Eventide
Nina Allan
reid
07.06.05

For when the dusk of dreams
Comes with the falling dew
Bird songs at eventide
Call me to you
– Royden Barrie –



When she took over from Dennis Marchont there were six dragons out on the Sward. The Sward was five acres square, a scrubland of bush-moss and sarg-vetch hemmed in on all sides by stands of bloodoak and phosphor. It was Billings who had named it the Sward, and even though Billings had died the name had stuck. From the air the land looked polluted, like a wrinkled greenish piecrust, or a scab.

"Quilla and Percival have been out there most of the day," said Marchont. "Lydia's just arrived. It's all written down in the log." He put up his hood and pulled the zipper of his yellow zircon bush-jacket all the way to the top, so that only his eyes and cheeks could still be seen. "Can you sign me off now, or should I wait?"

Dennis Marchont liked to abide by the rules, a trait that sometimes made him tiring to work with. Isabel found it interesting and strange, that such scrupulous pedantry should sit so blamelessly alongside the species of bashful wonderment that made him unable to resist naming the dragons. His delight in the Fendrics was spontaneous and inexhaustible, but his diligence sometimes amounted almost to prudery. She supposed that in many respects he was still a schoolboy. She put down her rucksack and entered the time and then her name in the steelbound Microlap that was the log. She swiped Marchont's timecard and told him he could go. In the beginning they had shared the watches. Six months on that seemed extravagant and unnecessary. Schwarowski had all but lost interest in the bush. The Sward was mostly quiet and the dragons seemed as morbidly unadventurous as zoo animals. He had shifted his attention to the crill-lakes, and the vast underground cave complexes that perforated the hills below North Fall. Isabel thought that if she had wanted to abandon the hide then Schwarowski would most likely have let her.

Percival and Quilla were always together. Dennis Marchont supposed they were a pair. The smaller, pink-winged dragon, Lydia, stood close beside them, tearing up quark roots with her overgrown carbon-coloured nails. On the other side of the Sward three others were grazing on sarg-vetch, resting their forelegs against the trees as if they were dogs. Two of them were occasional visitors, Fendric 7 and Fendric 20. She thought the third was the six-toed male that Marchont referred to as Gulliver, but until she unpacked her glasses she could not tell. In the open space just in front of the hide Percival spread his wings, testing the humid air as if for flight. His scales were a dull slate blue with a sprinkling of pinkish-white patches across the back. His wings, stretched tight, were translucent and membranous, as soft and pearly grey as the wings of bats. Despite all evidence to the contrary, Dennis Marchont was still convinced that the dragons were able to fly. Most of their colleagues were sceptical. Schwarowski didn't care.

Isabel took off her jacket and dug down inside her rucksack for her thermos and field glasses. There were glasses in the hide but she preferred to bring her own. On top of the thermos was a grey fleece-lined sweatshirt, but it was unlikely that she would need it. The hide was constructed of pli-glass. Schwarowski said that pli-glass had a molecular hardness comparable with that of diamond, that the only thing capable of making a hole in it was a heat-gun. So far the bush had not presented them with anything large enough or strong enough to test that theory, but Isabel was in no doubt that it kept out the cold.

Her watch would last six hours. Towards the end of that time it would begin to get dark. The cabin was equipped with trannel lights, but in spite of the one-way pli-glass Isabel preferred not to switch them on. On the far side of the Sward the phosphor in the bloodoaks began to glow. The light it gave off was greenish and dank, sickly and impotent as marshfire. As the sky drew down its shades, Isabel watched the dragons. From time to time she made notes in the logbook, measuring the tea in her thermos against the time left until Evan Jalister returned to collect her in the buggy.

She had moments of terror before she woke, a recurring dream in which she was pursued by something febrile and monstrous, a whickering tarpaper Dron that crackled as it moved. The Dron was huge and septic, oozing blackness over the ground. When she woke she was nowhere. She grappled for a sense of herself, only to have it retreat into the darkness until it was gone altogether. She caught brief mind's eye glimpses of her Spitalfields apartment, of her parents' square white bungalow in Swanage. She imagined those places clearly, even though she knew that they probably no longer existed, that the people she had known there would mostly be dead. The medics in pre-flight counselling had warned her about the nightmares. Her personal physician had been a horse-faced woman with long heavy hair and large dark glasses. Her name had been Lisa Bernhardt. She had told Isabel that the nightmares were part of the adjustment.

"All that will pass," she had said. Isabel had made notes and nodded. She supposed that Dr Bernhardt was probably dead now too. She must have been forty when Isabel had last seen her; the voyage to Menhir Magna took fifty-six years. She wondered how often Dr Bernhardt had thought about her clients, speeding towards Menhir Magna while she herself went towards death. She wondered if such thoughts had been comforting, whether they granted her some promise of escape.

They had packed very little because Stevie had insisted that was best. He had taken the disc with the photographs out of her hand.

"It's a new beginning, Izzie, like being born again," he had said. "There won't be any use for the past." That was before the flight, before he had seen Sophie Pellow. There were times now when Isabel longed so fiercely for a photograph that she wondered if

longing alone might not be sufficient to restore one. It was a photograph of her sister that she wanted most, her sister Melanie with yellow sticks of corngrass caught in her hair. Melanie had been sixteen then; now she would be seventy-two.

Stevie was in the canteen. He had a tray with two bowls of kasha and was filling two beakers with tea. When he saw her coming he smiled. "How's it all going?" he said. "How are the dragons?"

"Hector's disappeared," said Isabel. "Dennis thinks he's flown away." Stevie smiled again and put a hand on her shoulder. Isabel watched as he carried the tray to one of the side tables and sat down next to Sophie Pellow. She wondered if complete happiness made people somehow immune to the sadness of others.

The dragons were changing colour. The green scales on Mozart and Gustav had started to turn bright yellow along their margins. Percival had amber patches amidst the blue. When he rubbed himself against one of the bloodoaks, gold specks came off on the bark and fell to the ground.

"It's probably seasonal," said Dennis Marchont, even though there had been no perceptible change in the weather. Menhir Magna was a huge planet, almost ten times the size of Earth. Away from the crill-lakes, the atmosphere was humid. In the depths of the bush, warm rain sometimes fell for days. The dragons rolled in the puddles, shaking themselves dry afterwards like greyhounds. Isabel used the grab-arm to collect some of the yellow scales and scoop them into a vac-jar. In closeup they were hexagonal, like the floor tiles in the canteen lavatories. When she shook the vac-jar gently back and forth they made a ringing sound on the glass like gravel or coins. She wondered if the dragons were moulting. She had once been to Indonesia to write a paper on Komodo Dragons. The Komodo Dragons had been many times smaller than the Fendrics, and yet sloughing their skins had made them sluggish and curmudgeonly, irritable as crocodiles. The behaviour of the Fendrics seemed unchanged.

Stevie had worked for Fitzwilliam Cartographers. He was helping to chart the surface of Menhir Magna. So far they had mapped the crill-lakes and the rush plain, and the tiny tract of bushland that bordered the Sward. She had heard that Schwarowski wanted them to leave off mapping the barrens and turn instead to the possibly fertile land beyond North Fall. In the weeks that followed their arrival, Stevie had liked to talk about what they were doing. Most likely he still did; it was just that he now talked to Sophie and not to her. She had lost all track of their progress. She kept to the hide, to the bush and the Sward; she restricted herself to watching the Fendric dragons. She saw Lydia arch her wings and dart forward, nipping the neck of her best friend, Fendric 30. The gesture seemed affectionate, although she had not yet learned enough to know for sure. Isabel recorded the incident in the log. She wondered what Earth had felt like to live on before Columbus had discovered America. The mapped world had been tiny, as the mapped lands around North Fall were tiny, at least within the context of Menhir Magna. She seemed to remember that women at the time of Columbus had largely been discouraged from studying science. She decided to christen Fendric 30 Judith. Judith had cut a man's head off and had whole operas written about her. Strong women still frightened men. Isabel couldn't decide how she felt about that, whether she was glad of it or sad.

The bush was full of life besides the dragons. She had seen leaf-changers and oakvoles, and the giant blue centipedes that someone had nicknamed Boxworms. There were hamster-sized, red-faced monkeys with long prehensile tails and naked toes. At first they had expected to find other things too: larger primates, maybe, or even men. Five years on that now seemed unlikely. She could tell Schwarowski was hoping they were alone. There were three thousand people living in the cabins and bunkers around North Fall; in another five years' time they expected a thousand more. Schwarowski was a leader of sorts because he had been there the longest. It would be less complicated, at least for him, if that was the way things stayed.

"Are they chitinous, do you think, or do they contain actual metal?" Schwarowski held the vac-jar to the light, watching the golden fragments flash and burn. The amber glow had not diminished. Isabel even suspected it might have grown.

"That's not my department," she said. "I'm only supposed to find things, not find out what they are." She liked Schwarowski, because he was a brilliant man who had never become arrogant. Not knowing something did not seem to frighten him in the way it did others, younger pretenders like Henderson and Cathcart. She thought perhaps he had stopped being afraid of anything since the death of Hermione Lakeman. Hermione Lakeman had died of Blanket Fever. As far as Isabel knew, Schwarowski had been alone ever since.

"You're a marine biologist anyway, not a dragonslayer," he said. "We could do with you up at the lakes."

"You've got Morton, and Lucy Vicinnicus."

"I know, but we still need you." He was still holding the vac-jar, passing it back and forth in front of his eyes. In the strange yellow glow from the scales, his deep-set eyes looked green instead of blue. "You should consider it, anyway," he said. "There are plenty of other sods who can work with Den." He put the jar down on his desk and crossed to where Isabel was standing. He reached for a file behind her. As he did so his brown-stained fingers brushed her hair. His hands had been attacked by some sort of suction-weed they had fished out of the crill-lakes. The skin damage appeared to be permanent, but thus far at least it did not seem to be cancerous. Stevie's hands were the hands of a draughtsman. Like Sophie Pellow's, they were lean and soft, an almost childish white.

"It's too soon for me to think about that," said Isabel. "And you know what Dennis Marchont can be like." People thought Dennis was boring, because he talked about nothing but dragons. That was why Isabel liked him; she wanted nothing else, at least for now. She turned to go, leaving Schwarowski alone with the personnel files and the vac-jar of dragon scales.

Stevie was out with Jalister. She had not seen him for days.

North Fall had lost more than a hundred of its settlers to Blanket Fever. They had vaccines now that alleviated the symptoms, but whilst working in the bushlands, few people went out of the hide. Isabel had been outside briefly, twice, when something had gone wrong with the grab-arm. On both occasions the dragons had stayed away. The dragons occasionally ate oakvoles and treemice, but mostly they stuck to greens. Sometimes they stood still in front of the hide, gazing at the one-way glass as if they guessed there might be somebody inside. The microphones picked up

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MORE TITLES OVERLEAF

their breathing and the muffled sounds their feet made in the leaves. Percival and Quilla had gone entirely amber. When the sunlight caught their backs their hides turned to gold. Isabel collected more of the scales into vac-jars. She stacked the jars in neat rows at the back of the hide. They glowed at her weakly, like headlamps gliding through fog.

As the night came on the sounds of the bush increased. The bloodoaks rustled, the hamster-monkeys whistled, the Velvet Ivy cracked open its flowers. From everywhere came the sweet, keening vibrato that Dennis Marchont had attributed to glassworms. In the tallest trees there was a twittering and yammering, a high-pitched cacophony that reminded her of birds. They had looked for birds on Menhir Magna, but so far they had found none. Isabel turned up the microphones so that the riotous sounds of the bush invaded the hide. It reminded her, obliquely, of late summer twilights in Swanage. There had been a carriage light over the door. The air in the lane had vibrated with the sound of swifts. She had seen the martins, too, waiting in line on the rooftops and the telegraph poles. When she had asked what they were doing, her father had stroked her hair and told her they were saying goodbye.

"The summer's almost over. It's time for them all to go."

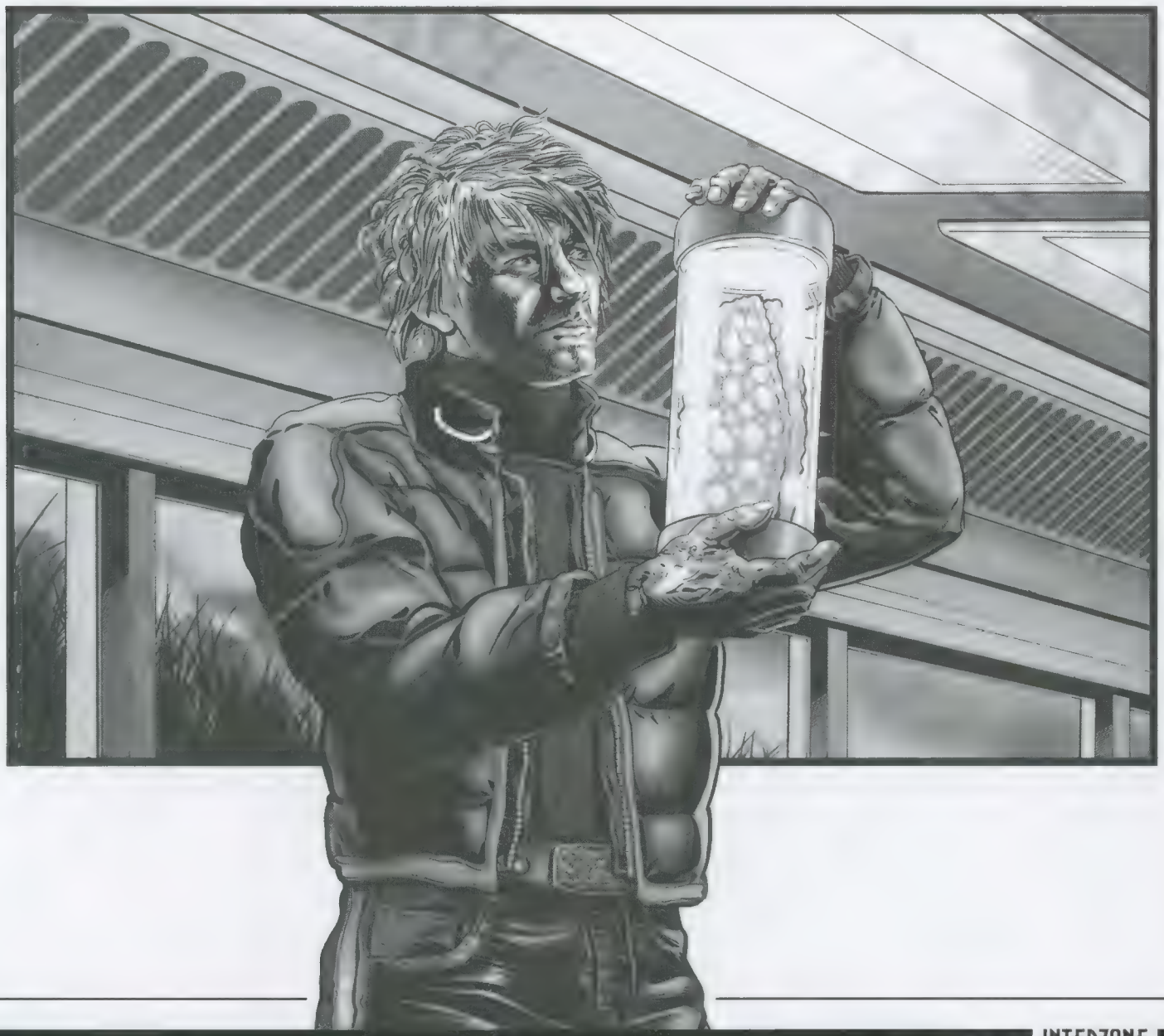
"How do they know where to go?" she had said. "How do they know it's time?"

"Nobody knows that, Isabel. Birds have always flown south for the winter. They've been doing it for thousands of years. We don't know how they know. Perhaps something calls them. Perhaps they get a message from the sun."

He had told her the flying south was called migration. He had shown her pictures in a book, photographs of African Wildebeest and Monarch butterflies, extinct American bison, snow-bellied Greylag Geese. "It must be a marvellous sight," he had said. "The birds against the sky as the sun goes down."

There was a record he used to play sometimes, an old CD on which a reedy tenor voice sang a ballad about birds singing. The song spoke of the evening, and a girl who was far away. Her chest felt suddenly tight, and the water in her eyes had clouded her vision. She wondered if there were not perhaps invisible birds in the branches of the bloodoaks, or birds like the glassworms, that could only be seen from one side.

Out on the Sward, the dragons had all stopped grazing. Percival lifted his head as if to listen; after a moment's stillness he opened his wings. They snatched at the last of the light and shimmered



red-gold. Isabel disengaged the vacuum seal and stepped outside.

The algae beneath her feet were soft and leached of colour. A cloud of ten-legged Inchflies rose up around her knees. The dragons stood with their wings out, seemingly in thrall to the twilight. Percival made a low grunting sound in his throat that reminded Isabel of a bush-pig or a warthog. When she touched him on the flank, he lowered his head like a horse and nuzzled her arm.

His back and sides were golden. His flank felt warm and cold together, like some precious metal alive with the heat of its wearer. She moved one hand slowly back and forth over the Fendric's scales. She wondered what his fearlessness might mean.

The evening grew deep around her. She realised with a spasm of panic that she could no longer remember the words of the ballad about the birds. Her father had loved that song. She allowed her attention to wander, hoping that the lyrics would come back. A half-hour passed but still there was nothing there. She could bring to mind the title, but nothing more. The song had been called 'Bird Songs at Eventide.' She had never asked her father who had written the music. Such things had not been important to her, at least not then. As the stars began to come out the sounds in the trees began to die. Suddenly she was aware of a new sound, the whirr and grind of the buggy. She leaned her cheek against Percival's flank then left him and went back inside. She signed herself out of the logbook. By the time Dennis Marchont appeared she was ready to go.

"They're silicon-based," said Schwarowski. "The lab boys are really on fire." He had a jar of the scales cracked open on his desk. As Isabel watched he poked them with one of his pens and began to stir. The scales cascaded over one another like chips of yellow marble. The vac-jar glowed with an iridescent amber light. "Incredible energy storage capacity," said Schwarowski. He removed the pen from the jar and tapped it three times against the glass. "If we can learn how to tap it, who knows where it might lead."

"Can you reconstitute the element?"

"Maybe in time. Until then we can harvest it at source." He glanced up at her, quickly, as if to gauge her reaction. "Do you think the Fendric dragons could be farmed?"

"That's impossible to tell, since we know next to nothing about them," she said. "I thought you wanted me off the Fendrics, anyway. You said the project was a waste of time."

"That was before." He put the lid back on the vac-jar, twisting it to reinstate the seal. "Do they present any risk?" Since Hermione Lakeman's death, Schwaroski had not cut his hair. As he leaned towards her it flopped forward, half-covering one eye. The hair was coarse and grey, like a wolf-pelt. There were no wolves on Magna. It was hard to remember exactly what a wolf was like. Schwarowski brushed the hair back, as if he were swatting a fly. "I can let you have more people," he said. "Once Thorsen comes back from the caves." The patches on his hands seemed darker. In places they looked almost black.

"We can't put people in danger," she said. "We can't afford to." She glanced down at his hands then looked just as quickly away. Schwarowski folded his arms, almost knocking the vac-jar sideways from the desk. He was a big man, seemingly undiminished by hardship or age. Hermione Lakeman had been small in stature but in other ways she had been Schwarowski's equal. Isabel felt suddenly close to her, though she had known her only slightly when she was alive. She remembered the way Percival had brushed her hand with his mouth, the cold-warm feel of the luminous amber scales. He had seemed almost to recognise her. In any case, he had not been afraid. "It takes a long time to domesticate a species," she said. "Sometimes it can take many years." They still did not know how often the Fendrics might breed. Since they had been on Magna they had seen no young dragons born. The smaller Fendrics all had pink wings, like Lydia, but that was no clear guide to their age.

"We should bring one in for dissection," said Schwarowski. "It would tell us how they react to being caught." He uncrossed his arms again, once more taking hold of the jar. "You should come over one evening," he said. "There's a lot to talk about."

Outside Schwarowski's office Isabel came face to face with Sophie Pellow. She was carrying a black metal z-rack stacked full of floppies. Her fine blonde hair had a greenish cast, like something that lived in the sea. The girl moved lightly, almost without a sound. "We heard about the scales," she said. "That's really amazing." She used the word 'we' casually, carelessly, without emphasis. Sophie Pellow was a geographical statistician who had completed her training in Dublin. She had a Boettscher score of 145. It was unlikely that she would ever have met Stevie had they not all come to Magna. She spoke with an Irish accent that reminded Isabel of the red-headed actress she had seen once in an historical TV drama about the Troubles. She found she could not hear Sophie Pellow's voice without thinking of freshly-baked soda bread and the piercing green aroma of earth after rain. She supposed that a lot of people, men especially, might hear that voice and forget about the high-ranking Boettscher score and the endless rows of numbers in her head.

"It's all been Dennis, really," she said. "Lizards aren't strictly my field." She thought about the word Schwarowski had used: dragonslayer. There had been more than a dozen people using the hide at first and that was what everyone had called them, even though there had been no plans then to kill anything. The island people of Rinca did not kill Komodo Dragons because the animals were sacred. The Blanket Fever victims had been incinerated quickly to prevent contagion and then scattered out on the rush-plains somewhere beyond the camp. When Hermione Lakeman had died there had been a funeral of sorts, but so far as Isabel could remember the word 'sacred' had not been used. It was hard to believe in anything, so far away from home. From the vantage point of North Fall the universe seemed larger, somehow, than it had been before. During her time on Earth Isabel had never really thought about God; now, the planet of Menhir Magna seemed too big to accommodate Him.

"It might well be a breakthrough," said Sophie Pellow. "Stevie says it could change everything." She used his name as an everyday object, a bedsheet or a spoon, a shirt, a knife.

"There's a long way to go," said Isabel. "Anything could happen."

It was twelve hours until her next shift. In her room, she downloaded the last of the five piano concertos by Beethoven and then opened her microjournal. She wondered if she might use the graphics function to reproduce the photograph of Melanie. She had never been particularly skilful at graphics, but there was plenty of time now to learn. She had heard a rumour that Schwarowski had once gone in for painting. She wondered if it were true.

There's a long way to go
Anything could happen
It's a big planet
They could be anywhere
– Isabel –



The nights had grown longer and a little colder. Lars Thorsen's party would soon be returning from the caves. When that happened, Schwarowski wanted Thorsen to put up some kind of solar fence around the Sward.

"It shouldn't be too difficult," he had said to her. "Not when they can't fly out." Schwarwoski had taken to shaving more regularly and to tying back his hair with a piece of frayed black cord that looked like an old bootlace. Sometimes he played cards in the canteen with Henderson and Cathcart. The younger men made jokes about his hands.

There was no moon on Magna. Instead, the stars were spread thickly across the sky like moth-holes in an old blanket. Instead of the black, whispery monsters made of tissue paper, Isabel dreamed mostly about her sister Melanie. In one dream, Melanie ran across the street in front of a car. When the car got to where she was, she was no longer there. Sometimes there were sheep in the dream. Melanie unlatched a tall metal gate and soft white bodies poured out onto the road.

"It's alright," said Melanie, when Isabel tried to stop her. "The sheep will be alright, because they know their own way home."

When she woke in the night and drew back the pro-blinds the stars shone down with a hard, silver light that was as bright as moonlight. During the warmest of the summer evenings she and Melanie had sometimes taken blankets from the airing cupboard and spread them out over the lawn. They had lain side-by-side on the blankets, talking and looking up at the sky. Isabel knew all the constellations off by heart. Melanie gave the stars names of her own instead. "I can see someone looking down," she said. "The Great Dog-Warden of Highersloth."

"He'd already be dead, by the time you saw his light," said Isabel. "The light from that star takes a hundred years to get here. Or maybe it's a thousand. I can't remember for sure."

"Don't tell me that. I think it's sad," said Melanie. They heated up milk in the kitchen and drank it from the wide blue and white bowls that were normally used for breakfast. They had liked to pretend it was goat's milk, the way they had seen it in the *Heidi* films. Melanie always played the part of Heidi because she was the youngest. Isabel had to be Clara, the sad and serious German girl who had forgotten how to walk. At the end of the film, Clara had suddenly stumbled to her feet as a column of goats streamed past her down the Alm. Somewhere in the distance someone had been ringing a bell.

When Stevie came back from the lakes he had grown a beard. "I heard about the project," he said. "Well done." His voice sounded different, as if he had tried to change it to go with the beard. From the way he spoke to her Isabel supposed he had worked out a way of forgetting who she was.

"I didn't really do anything," she said. "Has everything been OK?"

"It's the best thing I ever did, coming out here." He looked over her shoulder along the corridor. When Isabel turned her head there was nobody there.

"We're living a life that no one else has ever lived," said Dennis Marchont. "Nobody's done that for centuries, not since Columbus or Vasco Da Gama. I find that makes up for a lot." He zipped up his swamp-boots but left his jacket hanging open. The sleeves of the jacket were stained green around the cuffs, the dense, saturated green of oakmoss or bush-algae. Isabel supposed that Dennis had been going outside.

"Nobody knows anything about us any more," said Isabel. "It's as if we don't even exist."

"People will know in time. That's why we have to write it all down." He touched the logbook briefly with the pads of his outstretched fingers. His small, square hands were flecked with age-spots. She thought of Schwarowski's hands, the long ridged fingernails blackened as if by tar. Once Dennis had gone she opened the logbook at the micro-marker. He had been sketching diagrams showing the Fendrics' wings. 'Juvenile', he had written, and then 'mature'. On the previous page there was a list of calculations and a paragraph detailing recent changes in weather conditions in the bush in general and most especially on the Sward. His writing was neat and even, like that of a teacher. At the foot of the page there was a rough drawing showing a crowd of stick figures and a flock of what looked to be birds. Dennis had given the stick-people crowns as if they were deities or kings. Beneath the drawing he had written 'seasonal exodus', in underlined forward-sloping capitals. When she looked at the drawing again she saw that the things in the sky were not in fact birds, but dragons. The stick-men raised their arms to them, as if in welcome. Isabel wondered who the people were meant to be.

The dark now came almost at once, like a cloud passing over the sun. When she took off her swamp-boots the algae beneath her feet felt damp as grass. As the stars began to come out the dragons unfolded their wings. It was Percival who took off first; leaf-litter swirled in his wake as he left the ground. Quilla stared up at him, then gathered herself and flew. The rest rose in a body and suddenly the air was dense with them. Their wings glowed strident as bronze in the light from the stars. They wheeled in convoy, like a flight of Monarch butterflies above the Atlantic. They cleared the copse of bloodoaks and then they were gone. Smaller things flitted amongst the leaves, a stiff tangled jumble of wings. The constellations were nameless. The shadows between the trees made enormous pockmarked faces against the sky.

The doorstep grew cold in the dusk and the moon was full. The damp air made the old woman's bones ache, but still she stood in the twilight and gazed at the stars. Her hair lay smooth and white against her cheek. Behind her in the trees the night-birds began to sing.

"Do you know where they might have gone to?" said Schwarowski.

"It's a big planet," said Isabel. "They could be anywhere."

Nina Allan lives in Exeter and has published many stories, but never before in *Interzone*.



I am the lover. I am the chef. I am the preterite priest.

I am the secret, unknowable ingredient. You may taste me a thousand times, but never hold my essence on your tongue or capture it in your memory.

I am the flavor of ecstasy. Taste me and know God.

PRAYER OF THE ASSAISONNEMENT SAINTS

THIS, MY BODY

JEREMIAH TOLBERT

My *devoreuse* attacks her salad with animalistic fury. Dressing glistens from her naked breasts in the warm lights of the sacred banquet hall. Her mind is subsumed by the taste of my skin.

The salad of mixed greens dusted with light vinaigrette covers my calves and shins. The dressing works well as a glue and holds the leaves to my skin until my *devoreuse* for the evening plucks them with her fingers, or more often, with her teeth. Roasted pepper chicken steams on my right thigh, and a garbanzo bean and raisin dish cools on my left. Chilled strawberries are affixed to my stomach and soft penis with a sugary glaze.

And I am bored; I've offered myself as the banquet altar countless times. I glance around the room. The guests are mostly women tonight. They are all intoxicated by the feast. I want to know what the other *assaisonnements* have prepared for their *devoreurs*.

Brother Lucien returns my gaze across the room as an overweight woman I do not recognize devours a main course of quiche from his chest. Lucien's quiches always come out burned, and I can smell the charred edges from here. Lucky for him, even garbage would taste like ambrosia if eaten from his body. Lucien yawns, and I have to stifle one of my own.

She has finished her salad, and I can feel her lips and teeth brazing my thighs. I am instructed to respond to this; I release a low growl and make myself grow hard. The waifish girl moans and bites harder. I try to remember what Quisinado Alejandro told me about her as I prepared the meal. Her name is Adriana Golspin, and this is her nineteenth birthday. Her meal tonight is a gift from her mother. I wonder if her mother is the woman making short work of Lucien. They have similar skin and hair.

While Adriana eats, I close my eyes and breathe deeply. The many courses around the room are like bright stars in my mind. A full pantry of ingredients have been put to use tonight. I seek out my favorite smell; it exudes from a pastry desert that Morgan has baked for his *devoreuse*, a frequent visitor to the House of Culinary Delight. Cinnamon affects me; it makes me

dizzy, and all I can think about is the tingle in my sinuses at the back of my throat. It's one of the few pleasures I am allowed, but only sparingly. A sharp pain in my thigh brings me back from the odor; she has nearly broken the skin. I'm not bleeding, but I can tell there will be a bruise. I make a note to have Alejandro repair it in the morning, and send the bill to the Golspins.

Adriana is rich, of course. All of my *devoreuses* are, thanks to the agreement I have made with the quisinados that run our brothel and temple. For a few illicit samplings of my skin, they agreed to my plans. I want a private contact, somewhere far away from the House. A private contract pays more, and with a private contract, I will be able to afford proper culinary school and the treatments that will restore the humanity that my family traded away for a pittance.

I make a silent prayer to a God I have little faith in any longer. *Let her be the one.*

Adriana has made it to the desert now, and I can feel her desire brushing across me like the memory of soft cloth. Her breath quickens, and her hands play chopsticks across my ribs and stomach.

"Would you wish to commune with the holy wine in private?" I ask softly.

"Oh yes," she whispers, reaching down and taking me in her hand. "Please."

I climb from the couch slowly, careful not to shake the remaining bits of food from my body. I take her by her hand and lead her away from the banquet hall to my private room. She nuzzles my neck from behind and strokes me with her free hand.

Inside my room, we fall to the bed. I am not passionate; I imitate passion. But incensed by the meal and the taste of my skin, she does not notice. They never do. I feel the thrusts of my hips, her lips upon my skin, her tongue darting and tasting each inch, each variation in my flavor. But I do not feel the natural response. That was taken away before I was old enough to appreciate it for what it was, taken by the same process that gave me my special taste, my seasoned body.

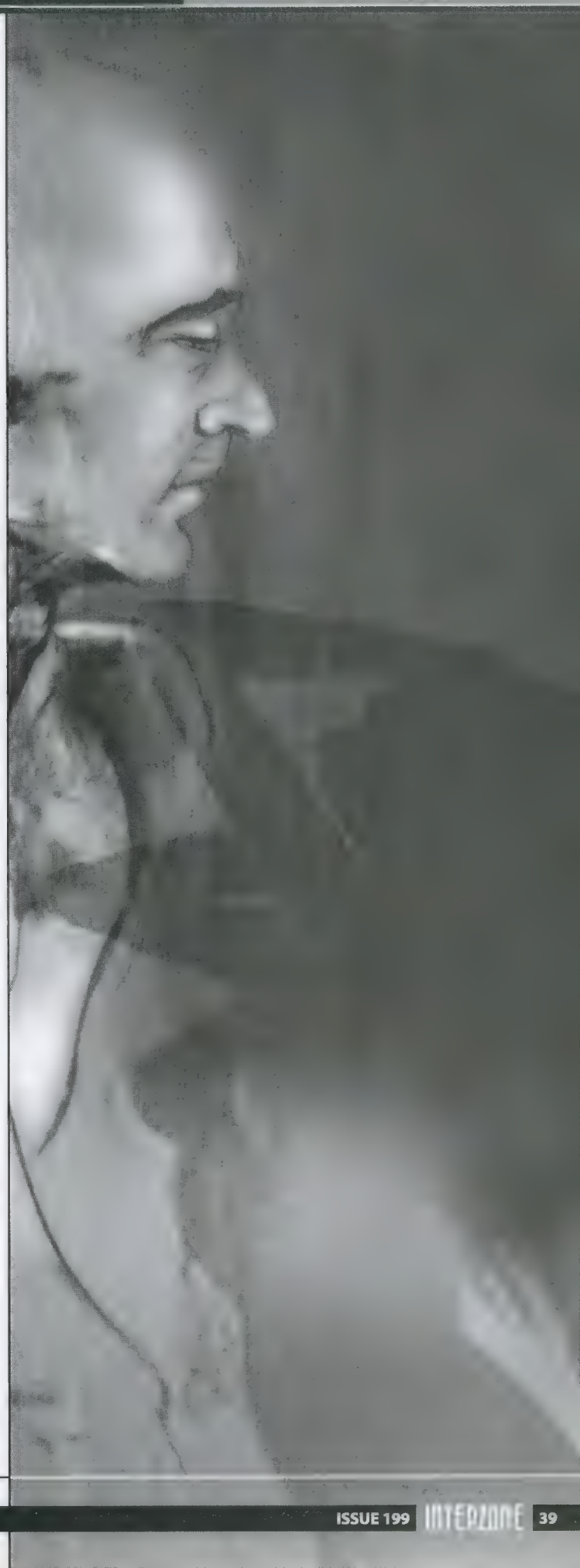
The quisinados told me that this lack of feeling was an improvement. For me to feel would be a distraction from my task. It is not for me to know God. I am the instrument of His desire, the preterite passed over by God for the salvation of others.

Adriana comes, and comes again. I continue to make love to her until she demands, gasping for air, that I stop. I obey, and she rolls away tangled in the crimson silk sheets. I lay in silence, breathing slowly.

She dials the room for the ocean. Aegean lights streams from above and the sound of distant waves lapping against the shore plays from the many speakers hidden around the room. An ache stirs deep within me, a longing for something hidden in the depths of memory. I cannot remember ever seeing the ocean, but I miss it somehow.

Adriana shivers with aftershocks as she lays on her back and watches ripples play across the ceiling. I watch her, waiting for instructions. Her mother has paid for the entire evening, so I do not leave.

After a minute, she speaks. "I wish I could have you every day."



I carefully sit up, and then pour a glass of wine from the bottle at the bedside table. I place my finger in the glass and stir it gently, adding my flavor to the liquor. I offer the glass to her lips, and she drinks greedily. My voice even, I say, "You could buy my contract. I am available."

She sighs and rolls over to face a wall of holographic fan corals swaying in time to the crashing waves. "Daddy would never allow that. Mother has to keep her *assaisonnement* at the villa. And I don't think I could afford anyone as good as you . . ."

I swallow bitter words before I can speak them and sit silently. My taste is in her mouth again, and it won't be long, I know. I am colder to the prospect of more sex with her now. I cannot enjoy it any more than any man or woman enjoys a job, but now I am not looking forward to the rest of the evening.

She spins back to face me; grin like a shark across her face. The look makes me ill, but I chastise myself for the feeling. I should know by now that I am only the instrument, and her look is not for me. I force a smile and concentrate on making myself erect again. "Whatever you wish."

not allowed to bathe more than once a month.

The quisinados gave me a private cubicle, and I soon learned it was also my classroom. Courtesans visited me each night and taught me the lessons of lovemaking without a care for my feelings. And always, they were licking me, tasting me, following the development of my essence. I rarely saw the others then, except for cooking classes. That was the beginning of my isolation from man and God.

It was also when my true training began. Everything before had only been the quisinados passing time, waiting for me to ripen. I was taught to use my body in every part of the preparation of food. No ingredient was mixed without having contact with some part of our skin. I was taught to serve the food from my body, making it the most holy of sacraments.

As the therapy warped my body into God's instrument, as the teachers instructed me in the ways of flesh, my mind and soul became numb to passionate emotions. I felt nothing but a base and seething anger, one that I was powerless to wield.

What kind of God would wish for me to be molded into this form, the *assaisonnement*? What kind wished for me to give up my own salvation to provide for others?

I hated this life. I hated Him.

Sex is food, and food is sex. Both are passions that awaken the soul. Through holy ecstasy, we may know Him and His passion for us



This is the precept of the Order of Cuisine and Flesh, the order that purchased me from my parents



Sex is food, and food is sex. Both are passions that awaken the soul. Through holy ecstasy, we may know Him and His passion for us. This is the precept of the Order of Cuisine and Flesh, the order that purchased me from my parents. I cannot remember my family, but my files say that they had been farmers, struck hard by devastating famines. When we were children they told us – the other students and I – that we would be quisinados, the priest-chefs of the Order. I have always loved food, and the prospect was exciting.

First, we were trained in the basic craft of cooking. We were taught which ingredients can be combined, and which cannot. We were taught the principles of heat. Five years of lessons, and I enjoyed them, truly. It was the most food I had ever been allowed to eat.

Second, we were taught the word of God, but only his most basic lessons. We were taught to pray. The quisinados said then that we were too young to learn real theology. Soon, it became apparent that they would never teach us the deeper meanings.

Puberty struck, and the quisinados took me from my bed in the night into another part of the compound, a place where the quisinados wore masks and the walls were white as bleached flour. I do not remember the gene therapy in detail. When I try to think back on that time, all I can see in my mind is a giant needle, dripping milky fluid from the tip. The pain lasted for weeks. The fevers nearly killed me. My hair fell out and never grew back, as was the case with all *assaisonnements*. I had to take hours of sunlight each week afterwards so that compounds in my skin would properly form into the super-flavonoids. I was

It is early morning, and Adriana has been gone for hours. I have not dialed the room to neutral. The sounds of the waves evoke nostalgia in me that I twist and turn in my mind, examining it for clues to my past. Suddenly, the waves cut out and are replaced with Montero's voice, the master quisinado of the House. "Brother Antonio. Please see me in my office at your earliest convenience."

I take a towel from a hidden cabinet and wipe myself down, then toss it down the garbage chute. I put on a terrycloth robe and hurry out.

The master quisinado only summons *assaisonnements* who have performed poorly. I have only been summoned once before, when Sister Lythos replaced my basil with ground oregano as a prank, and in my hurry to prepare a meal for a latecomer, I hadn't noticed. A Chiba businessman had been allergic. Since then, I have always tasted my ingredients. The others are too jealous of me and my popularity. I cannot count any of them as a friend, and I've learned to not need any.

As I grow close to the quisinado's office, I can hear a conversation behind the cherry wood door. I hear a man with a Spanish accent, speaking with Montero.

"Where did he train?" asks the accented voice.

"Rockford, here in the US, but the monastery was run by expatriate Italians," answers Montero. "His particular essence is exquisite, and was handcrafted by the absolute best of our Order.

If any can aid you to know Him, it is Brother Antonio."

"And his skills?"

"Unparalleled in this House, certainly. I have seen better, but rarely."

I feel hope and relief mixed sweetly. Could this be Adriana's father, come to buy my contract? Certainly, I have done nothing wrong, or Montero would not be describing me in such glowing terms. I knock.

"Come in," Montero says.

The man with the accent wears a neat pinstripe suit. He sits in the oak chair opposite from Montero, and a black cane rests against the side of the chair. He is older than me by a quarter of a century at least – I guess he is in his early fifties. His features are Hispanic: a prominent jaw, black hair faded to grey at the temples, and a sharp, aristocratic nose. I do not recognize him.

"Brother Antonio, this is Señor Escamilla," Montero says.

"A pleasure to meet you," I say, glancing to the floor as I was taught.

"He is rather handsome," Escamilla says. "A foot taller than me as well." There is a hint of worry in his voice, and it slays the hope in my heart.

"He is the best we have. He may be the best on the continent," Montero says, smiling. "Señor Escamilla may be interested in purchasing your contract, Brother Antonio."

I glance up. Some *assaisonnements* prefer men, and some prefer women. In that sense, we are no different from anyone else. For the most part, I prefer women, but my preference is meaningless in the face of such an opportunity. Eventually, Señor Escamilla will grow tired of my flavor, and I will serve out my contract for him as a disused possession. My debt to the quisinados would be repaid, the debts my family placed upon me. Most private contracts would earn me enough to pay for a reversal after a couple of additional years. Then, finally, my life would truly begin.

"Taste him," Montero says, waving his hand at me. I step forward, and Señor Escamilla takes my wrist and licks the base of my palm, as is the custom. He is no amateur.

"Mmm. Quite delicious. However, it is not a matter of whether I like the taste. He's to be a gift for my Contessa." I am surprised to hear this. *Assaisonnements* are offered as gifts often, but my full contract would be a very expensive gift.

"Perhaps she could come to pray with me herself," I say, emboldened.

Escamilla shakes his head and smiles lightly. "That would ruin the surprise." From his look, it is clear that I am to be a toy. Not an instrument of religious observance. I feel some relief at this.

"Have you made your decision?" the quisinado asks. "I'm afraid I cannot hold him for you. The word is out about Antonio, and I expect there will be a bidding war soon."

Escamilla squints up at me, seeming to examine every pore. I concentrate on remaining still, and tensing various muscles. Escamilla would most likely not fall for anything so simple, but I decide that it cannot hurt.

"I will take him," Escamilla says with a quick nod.

I quickly collect my things while Escamilla and Montero sort out the details of the contract transfer. My belongings are meager: a recipe reader, a few changes of clothes, and some unusual spices I bought for myself on my rare visits to the market. I am so thrilled that I nearly forget my real nutmeg, hidden in a hollow within my mattress. Already, I am imagining life after all this, after servitude. I imagine opening a real restaurant. I almost allow myself to imagine a family.

I meet with Escamilla at the House entrance an hour later. "My transport awaits us," he says, walking past me briskly and out the door.

I follow him outside. A sleek black craft is hovering inches above the pavement, and the nearest door is open. I climb into the limousine without a single glance at the House that has been my home for two years. It has done nothing but held me back and kept me from my goals. Now my hard work is finally paying off.

Escamilla pours himself a scotch from the minibar – from the odor, it is obviously not synthetic. For the first time, I wonder just how wealthy Escamilla is. Then I notice that he is staring at me, and I devote my attention to the carpeted floor.

"We might as well be friends, Antonio. Considering that you will be screwing my wife before the week is out," Escamilla says. I flinch at the harsh word. Some of my *devoreuses* have liked harsh talk, but I never have. Life is harsh enough without taking such an act and degrading it with cruelty. "Would you like a drink?"

"I'm sorry sir," I say. I shift uncomfortably in my seat. "Alcohol can sour the taste."

"They really haven't allowed you many pleasures in life, have they?" Escamilla shrugs and downs his scotch. "First, I shall tell you about myself. The staff gossips would if I do not, so I feel it best to maintain my power and explain myself." He pauses, glancing out the window as the limousine lifts off, rapidly gains altitude. I feel queasy, but that soon passes. "I am a businessman. My interests are off-world, but I prefer to make my home here on Earth, as does my wife. However, I am off-world often, for weeks or even months at a time. Do you understand?"

I nod.

"My previous marriage did not survive the strains this situation places on a relationship. It lingered and died a slow death. I do not intend for my second marriage to suffer the same fate, and I love my Contessa deeply. If I did not, you would still be down there pleasing the petty debutantes. I love her so intensely that I've bought your contract." Escamilla pours himself another drink and again, he downs it in one gulp. He swirls the ice cubes in the glass and stares at them. I feel that I should say something, but I do not know what.

"Contessa will not be in need of your *services* while I am in our home. She is free to use you in whatever way she wishes while I am away. You will stay in the guest house, and you will make yourself *invisible* while I am home." The menace that seeps into his voice now is frightening. What have I gotten myself into?

"What kind of facilities will be available to me?" I ask, trying to change the subject.

"There's a full kitchen in the guest house. Gustave, the house chef, can assist you with acquiring any supplies you are in need of."

"Thank you for this opportunity to spread the word of God, sir."

Escamilla shrugs, and the menace fades. He looks weary and old. "I don't believe in the religious pabulum that your creators espouse. You are simply the most expensive sex toy available on the market. I won't hesitate to sell your contract to a disease-infested whorehouse in Singapore if you cross me. I am forgiving of many things, but not betrayal."

"I understand." I do not fully comprehend his possessiveness.

Such rules are to be expected; they taught us in the order that not everyone could see us as a tool of God, despite all the attempts of the Order to dehumanize us. It was a difficult balance to strike, making us useful and yet still alluring.

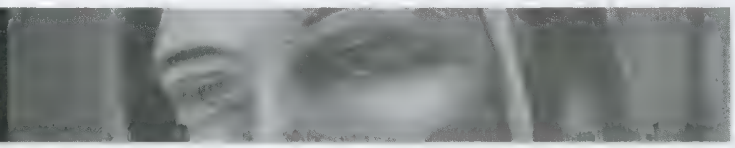
Escamilla glances out the window at the blur of ocean passing below, then seems to remember something. He turns back to me with the frightening look of ferocity from before. "There's one more thing. My god damned daughter is living with us – her mother threw her out again. You are to have no contact with her. None!" He smiles.

"Certainly," I say, but I can't help but notice that his knuckles have turned white from the force of his grip on the ebony cane.

A faceless bioservant directs me to the small, old-fashioned bungalow at the rear of the estate immediately upon our arrival. I'm uncertain where we are; it is night, and the grounds are surrounded by orange groves and the air is warm here. Some place closer to the equator, I decide. It was much cooler at the House.

I never learned geography except when it was necessary for choosing the best ingredients. Even then, the concept of place was only a sort of label defining quality. I have heard of places like California, Italy, Spain; places known for their foods or wines. I've even seen pictures, on the rare occasions that I had time to seek idle amusements from the vids.

What is a tool without a purpose? I am made to fulfill a job, and only by fulfilling it will I achieve my heart's goals; freedom from my altered nature



I commit myself to performing in the manner that my devoreuse desires. Any holy aspects of the equation are not in my hands, but in a greater power



I pass the days in seclusion. I try to pray, but prayer only makes me feel guiltier. I forsook God years ago. I know it is hypocritical to turn to Him only in times of need. But what has He ever done for me? At each turn, he has denied my prayers. If I am God's tool as the quisinados believe, then he has left me in the rain to rust.

What is a tool without a purpose? I am made to fulfill a job, and only by fulfilling it will I achieve my heart's goals; freedom from my altered nature. I commit myself to performing in the manner that my *devoreuse* desires. Any holy aspects of the equation are not in my hands, but in a greater power. If she desires a lover, she will get one. If she wishes to know God . . . I will have to deal with that when the time comes.

I busy myself waiting for Escamilla to depart by doing an inventory of the kitchen's pantry and tools. Many of the dishes I have sent back to the house. I do not need them, and they only serve as a bitter reminder of what I once believed I would learn. Each day, one of the maids, an elderly woman with watery eyes, visits me to deliver fresh produce and supplies. I take one meal each day in the late evening, something simple and spare. I eat with my bare hands. Even after a lifetime of it, I have not grown weary of my own taste.

As I lay beside the pool, receiving my dose of sunlight for the week, the maid comes around the house to find me. "The master has left on business and will not return for some time," she says with a broad grin. "Come with me to see Gustave. He will give you everything you need for tonight."

Finally! I have yet to see my *devoreuse* after nearly two weeks of waiting. A shiver passes through me. "Yes, I must collect ingredients." I have a list prepared in advance for this occasion.

I quickly retrieve my list and I follow her to the large house down narrow paths between the orange trees. They are in blossom, and their intoxicatingly sweet scent is overwhelming. From what I have seen, they never fruit. These trees have been altered to permanently in flower. I risked going out among them one night, but felt as if someone was watching me the whole time. The Escamillas employ many guards to keep the grounds safe, but I never see them, no matter how much they must see me. Being watched like that reminds me too much of my days of study, and I avoid going out at night now.

The house is a mansion, three stories tall and ornate with columns and sinuous trim. Susanna leads me past fountains and rows of deep red roses to a small door. I smell the sizzle of food in the pan, then hear the sounds of pots and cutlery rattling about the sink. Susanna leaves me standing in the doorway, my jaw agape.

This kitchen is what Heaven must look like. There are enough ovens and ranges to prepare a meal for hundreds here. Rows and rows of shiny copper pots, Teflon pans, baking sheets, sauté pans and cutting boards dangle from hanging racks above the cooking ranges and tables. The wooden table at the center of the room has been gnawed deeply over many years by every type of blade; it is etched with proud white scars. The table emits an odor that must be the platonic scent, the one and original, all encompassing smell of succulence.

"Come in, come in," an old man chirps from behind the counter on the far side of the kitchen, barely visible behind the hanging pans. He steps forward to meet me, brushing his hands across the grey apron tied at his waist. His sleeves are rolled above his elbows and soap covers his forearms. His hair is thin and silver and his eyes are like black olives nestled in his crinkled face. His nose is almost impossibly long and so crooked, I almost laugh. He is like an imp, mischievous and full of energy.

"I suppose you will be needing supplies for your first meal," he says, not really asking.

I remember the list in my hand. "I need these things."

He nods and takes the list from me, glancing over it. "Hmm. You know, you really should add garlic to the *pappa al pomodoro*."

"Yes, thank you," I say, holding irritation from my voice. He clearly has no idea what I am, what my skin does for my cooking. Garlic is one herb I rarely use because it conflicts heavily with my own flavor. But I am determined not to insult the chef.

"Very good. My name is Gustave, by the way." He holds out his hand. Instinctively, I give him mine and wait for him to bring it up to his mouth for a taste. Instead, he grasps my hand firmly and shakes, then releases it.

"I'll have one of the staff bring you these things." A hiss rises suddenly from one of the rear ranges as a pot of pasta boils over. "*Merde*!" He ducks through the hanging pots and to the stove.

I back out of the kitchen, filled with a mixture of awe and disappointment: awe at the facilities nearly four times the size of what I had available to me, and disappointed with the master chef. Surely Contessa would be impressed with my meal if Gustave was my primary competition.

Still, I am nervous. I check my recipes at least a dozen times, determined to make the best meal ever to grace her lips. I have decided this first meal will be spicy, yet delicate. Each dish requires a careful application of spices to compliment my own sweat and touch.

I stir the potato soup with my finger for several turns and then replace the lid. I feel like I have forgotten something, and then I remember that I must rub the chicken. I remove two breasts from a package in the cooler and rub them gently against my collar bone and the base of my neck, then down across my chests where the specialized sebaceous glands are most productive.

I wonder if I have jumped to conclusions. Contessa has sent me no word that she will come. Once the food has been attended to, I move to the large bay window at the front of my home and watch the path through the grove, occasionally checking the food. I have never burned a meal, and I will certainly not on this night of all nights.

Just before the sun sets, I see her, gliding down the path like a ghost. She is beautiful; staggeringly so, with long blonde tresses, pale skin. I imagine her eyes are blue. From the color of her skin and hair, I know what color her areoles will be, how sensitive to my touch they will be. Her body is like a cover of a book – the training of the Order has given me the ability to read her completely. I can hardly wait to turn the pages within her.

As she draws near, I check the meal one last time, don a robe, and then wait for her knock at the door. When it comes, my heart begins to race, and I have to focus to bring it back under control. When I open the door, she stands in the shadow as if embarrassed to be here. I have seen hesitation like hers before, and it has always been simple to overcome. "Come in please," I say. She shifts from foot to foot, her hands folded before her. Finally, she steps inside. Her eyes dart around the room, and her nostrils flare, filling with the scent of my cooking.

"I am Antonio," I say, and offer her my wrist. "I am your *assaisonnement*."

"I am Contessa," she says. Her voice surprises me; it reminds me of honey. I will enjoy letting her taste me, I decide. As much as I am able.

"Are you hungry?"

She nods. "Starving. Something smells wonderful."

"Come," I say, leading her to the table. A reclining couch like the ones at the House had been installed before my arrival. I slip the cloth of the robe from my shoulders and let it fall to the floor. "Please, sit," I say, and indicate the chair beside the couch. As I leave for the kitchen, she begins to undress. The ripple of gooseflesh across her back startles me.

I return with the salad applied, and a bowl of soup in my hands. I have made a fine *insalata mista* and a heavy chowder with just a hint of roasted peppers. Contessa sits before my bench, her legs crossed, looking more uncomfortable than I can nearly bear. I quickly place the soup on the stand beside my bench and take my place.

Under my breath, I recite the holy prayer. *I am the chef.*

"Lean forward," I say to her with a half-smile. I take a scoop of the soup onto my finger and offer it to her across the space between us. Slowly, she leans in and takes my finger into her mouth, licking it clean. When her lips close down, she freezes, and I watch as her pupils begin to dilate.

A smile begins to warm the delicate features of her face.

I am the lover.

The courses rush by in a blur. She devours the soup from the bowl of my hands, and then the chicken, I tear into strips and feed them to her from my shoulder. For desert, I offer her ice cream from my stomach. When I place it there, she gasps.

"Isn't that *cold*?"

"God has gifted me with an ignorance of such pain." The ice cream feels no colder or warmer than a person's touch. The nerves of my skin have been taught to lie, but only so much. We *assaisonnements* can still burn or suffer frostbite if we are not careful.

I am the priest.

"Mmm," she says. She takes a lick of vanilla from around my belly button.

I watch her devotedly devour the final course, and marvel at the sudden dispassion I feel. I had half-hoped that she would not give in to me so easily, as all my other *devoreurs* had. I had seen the courtships of others, when a couple would visit the House together. They flirted and teased one another, taunting each other with their desires. But I am irresistible. Contessa gives in so quickly.

She mounts me suddenly, even before finishing the desert. I barely have time to flood the proper blood vessels and ready myself. Her body rises and falls, and with each motion, she leans in and takes another lick of the melted cream from my skin.

I am the secret, unknowable ingredient.

"You must clean me also," she demands between gasps. I carefully lick the cream that has collected between her breasts, obeying, but not feeling. "Oh my God, oh my *God*!"

Her stamina seems endless. Each time I expect her to slip away, she seems to regain her wind. In order to hasten the end, I dedicate myself to finding the methods that make her flush: the places to kiss, the ways to let my fingers drift. The timing and motion of the hips; these find their way naturally, as I have been trained. I become her perfect meal and perfect lover.

We move from the table sometime in the night into the shower. From there, to the bed. Her mouth never leaves my body for more than a few moments. She explores my many variations of flavor with surprising intrepidity.

Sometime just before dawn, she pulls away, and as quickly as she had come, she is gone, slipping out the door, leaving only an orange-scented breeze. I lay in bed and wonder, not for the first time, nor do I imagine the last: what is it that I am missing in this? The sound of her moans, the sheen of sweat, and the wild look in her eyes. All of these things tell me something, dig

beneath the surface and search for purchase on a cliff that has been polished absolutely smooth by the quisinados. I offer the reactions these things seek, but falsely, as a learned response. Only to enhance her ecstasy, not in service of my own.

I listen to the crickets sing from the poolside, searching my reactions, and I find something that surprises me. I am lonely. But for whom? I fall asleep to the echoing of the unanswered question.

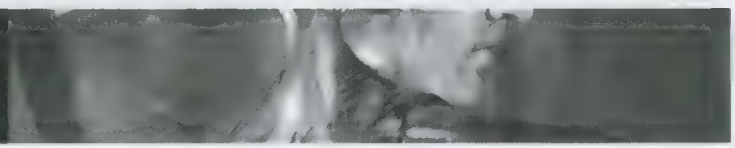
The first evening sets the example for the many nights that follow. Contessa visits every other night, and I learn to have meals prepared just before sunset each time. She storms in unhesitatingly now, her voice more commanding with each passing night. She is taking possession of me, and I am conditioned to accept it, even enjoy it in a sense. Some nights, she finishes the food I have prepared for her, but many nights, she falls on me in the midst of the second or third course. She loses herself entirely in me.

I watch as she thrashes wildly atop me, fingers covered in chocolate. Her pupils are barely more the pinpricks of ink in blue seas. It is then that I realize; we *assaisonnements* have a

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word for women and men like Contessa. We crudely call them taste buds. Their sensitivity to our super-flavinoids is so great that we are like a narcotic to them.

"Whose idea was I?" I ask in one of the few, brief pauses between bouts of frantic grappling. She lies on her side, her lips locked around my left nipple. She sucks gently, casually. This is how she relaxes now.

"I hinted to my husband that an *assaisonnement* would please me," she says, letting me fall from her mouth. My skin cools as her saliva evaporates in the night air. "It took him an entire *year*."

"Have you prayed with many of us before?" I ask.

She shrugs. "A few." She presses her lips against mine. "Let me taste your tongue . . . "

She probes the depths of my mouth, and I force my hands to run the length of her back. Am I an addiction? Am I just a drug to her? It is the ultimate achievement of the quisinados, for her to give into me so completely. I have achieved the goal they have been seeking for decades; I am at once a sex object and a tool, and not the least bit human to her. Through me, He loves her, even if she does not reciprocate.

I did not expect how bitter it would make me feel.

She begins to visit me every night, and then also in the afternoon. My muscles begin to ache from the effort of pleasing her, day after day. When she announces one morning that she has to leave to visit family in Asia, I am intensely relieved.

I sleep in. I subsist on the leftovers that have accumulated in my stores from the nights when Contessa cannot contain herself, which have become nearly every night now. I pass time reading from a collection of old traditional cookbooks in the house's net – the only material she has seen fit to give me access to. I have no vid in my bungalow, but I don't enter the house except to visit the kitchen. I have no idea when Senor Escamilla will return, and I cannot be caught out in the open when he does. As much as I have come to fear Contessa and her desire for my flavor, I still fear him more.

The feeling of standing still has come to me once again. I had thrown myself into my work early on, but now that Contessa is gone, I begin to think about my own future again. The cookbooks describe preparations that are almost mythical to me. Serves fourteen? The sheer volume of food boggles my mind.

I begin to visit Gustave in his kitchen. He prepares meals for the staff every night, and he lets me watch him work. I am aloof to his few feeble attempts at friendship. I have already decided that I must accelerate my plans and find a way away from the Escamillas. I have begun to develop a plan, and it leaves no room for friendship.

One evening as I sit and watch, I am amazed at the almost blasphemous way that Gustave tenderizes meat. Where I would use my fists, he uses a wooden mallet. He grins as he pounds a slab of meat with it, over and over again.

"What do you think of love?" I ask from my stool in the corner.

"You have too much time on your hands if you're thinking about *that*." Gustave tosses his steaks on the grill and wipes his hands dry on his apron. "Do you know what your problem is? You define yourself by what you do. What you need is a hobby. Ah, some of us get together every week and play poker. We could use another."

I shake my head. "I played poker once. They accused me of marking cards."

Gustave laughs. "We'll make you wear gloves. All problems have solutions, you know, God willing."

"I don't think cards are for me. The only thing I have ever really enjoyed is cooking, but I am my own crutch. If something doesn't turn out right, I can just touch it a little more. You never do that."

He shakes his head. "Terrible. You'll die of old age before you're thirty. Listen to me, my friend. I know something about these things; love is nothing but trouble, and every man needs a hobby. And you're right. Your skin is a crutch." He grins. "Just forget all that stuff, will you?"

"OK." I sigh. "I'll forget about it if you teach me how to do what you're doing to those vegetables."

"Come over here then."

I do. I'm careful not to ask the questions that I wanted to ask before he scolded me. What is love like? And how do you fake it?

Another week goes by, and Contessa has not returned. I surprise myself by missing her company. Besides Gustave and occasionally

Susanna, Contessa is the only person I have contact with here. Late in the evenings, I cannot sleep. By now, I have read every cookbook three times over. I decide its time for me to explore the Escamilla House. If I don't find something new to do, I will go crazy.

Remembering what Gustave said about the poker game, I wander up to the house. The kitchen is empty and dark, and I pick my way through into a large dining room that must seat thirty or forty people. It too is dark.

I pad through the empty halls of the large house, up and down stairs, searching for something that might somehow qualify as companionship. I listen for the sounds of life, and at first the halls are quiet. Then I hear the bubbling sound of canned laughter. A vid is playing somewhere, and by the sound of it, it's playing my favorite kind of show, a sitcom. Everyone on a sitcom is happy.

I follow the sound up another flight of steps and down a long hallway to the crescent of light spilling out from a door just cracked open. The room inside is decorated sparsely. A black leather couch – real leather, certainly – sits in the center of the room, facing a wall-sized vid screen. Larger-than-life characters make quips at one another, and canned laughter fills the room, echoing from the corners. In the glow of the vid, I can just make out the figure sitting on the couch.

She is everything that Contessa is not, at least in appearance. Her hair is black as well-used cast iron steel, and her skin is dusky-toned. She's composed of compact curves and youthful softness.

I start to back away, realizing who she must be. I picture Escamilla's white knuckles striking my face. His daughter speaks without looking away from the vid. "Come in."

"I'm not supposed to talk to you." I take another step back.

"Antonio, right? You're my stepmother's gift. That must be awkward, to be given to another as a gift." She turns to look at me, and I glance away. "Aren't you supposed to be a kind of priest? What kind of priest fucks his parishioners?"

Her words sting like vinegar. All I have to answer her with are preprogrammed responses. "The Order believes passion is the path to God, and that the *assaisonnements* are instruments for this purpose." I look down to realize that I have stepped into the room. What am I doing?

"The Order believes?" She raises a thin, black eyebrow. "Most people would say 'I believe,' you know."

"I believe it as well." Just being near her is filling a void of companionship within me, but it is creating another, a pit of fear in my stomach. "I was looking for Gustave . . . "

"Gustave doesn't live here. He has a home in the city. You can imagine what that's like for a girl with the munchies." She smiles. Her name is Rosalinda, I remember.

"I had better go." I turn to the door, and she is up and across the room in the time it takes me to blink. The light of the vid flashes across her arm, and I see intricate tattooes of swirls across her arms. I've never seen that kind of body art in my *devoreuses*. It is marvelous, how after so many years and so many women, this one stands out so readily.

"Wait just a moment." She stands next to me, and leans in slowly. I am frozen. Her tongue darts from between her dark lips and daubs my cheek. She withdraws, making a face. "Too bitter!" She waves her hand. "You can go."

I am too stunned to say anything. I back into the hall, and she softly closes the door in my face. Her eyes never leave me.

The kitchen is quiet, except for the quiet crackling from the ancient stone oven. I come here more and more often now, to escape my own home. I cannot avoid Contessa entirely, but she cannot expect me to be in my room every day.

"So, my friend. How is life on Ranchero Escamilla treating you these days?" Gustave kneads the dough with a rolling pin. I cannot take my eyes away from the sight. "I've been cooking for two again. I assume Señora Escamilla has returned."

I nod. Indeed, she returned two weeks ago, and I have barely had a night of rest since. I can smell the others on her, the other *assaisonnements*. I wish that they had eroded her passion for me, but instead they seem to have strengthened it. It is like she has an itch that I cannot satisfy.

"Still thinking about love then?" Gustave tosses the dough into the air, spinning it expertly. "You should take up gardening. There's a plot behind your little house. Nobody's planted there in a few years, but I'm sure if you put that back of yours into it, you could get some nice tomatoes. You like fresh tomatoes, yes?"

"The ones you bring me are fine. It doesn't matter anyway. I could serve gruel, and she wouldn't notice."

Gustave cocks his head. "Oh?"

"She scares me, Gustave. She needs something, and I don't think I can give it to her. I am one of the most skilled in my Order, but I cannot satisfy her."

Gustave walks to his spice rack and retrieves a handful of spices. He takes them to a bowl and begins mixing them with a thick tomato sauce. "That's an unpleasant situation for you to be in. Perhaps . . . " He tastes a spice from the tip of his finger, then adds a shake. "You could do something to reduce her interest in you. Behave in some fashion that repels her."

"I've thought of that. But what? She doesn't see me as a human being. I'm just a tool for her pleasure."

Gustave nods grimly. "There are ways to remind her. You think about that." He slathers sauce on the dough, dusts it with cheese and a handful of vegetables, and puts the dish in the oven.

"What are you making next?" I ask.

"Strudel," Gustave answers.

"Could you teach me?"

Gustave considers the idea. "OK, but promise me one thing."

"Anything."

Gustave grins. "Don't put your thing in the dough."

I know that he means well, but his words still sting.

I lie beside the pool, half-asleep. If I even shift myself, countless muscles in my body scream with annoyance. I don't know how much longer I can keep up with her. Each night, she takes longer and longer to climax. I have looked into her eyes, and I have seen a pain that mirrors my own looking back. If it wasn't for Escamilla, I would run away.

I hear footsteps coming from behind me, and I stifle a groan. She's far too early. Contessa has only been gone for two hours. I roll over, searching my mind for a greeting and opening my eyes. Rosalinda is there, not Contessa. "Hello," she says. Someone has placed an orange blossom in her hair. There is another scent in the air, unmistakable even among the orange trees. Cinnamon. My mouth begins to water, and I feel my eyes grow wide. "I think I've had too much sun," I stammer. "I need to go inside."

"You're frightened of me!" She laughs at this.

The sound makes me shiver.

"I'm frightened of your father," I say. I climb to my feet.

"Don't be. He's harmless." She reaches out for my hand. I don't withdraw it. She raises it to her mouth and places my finger on her tongue. She closes her lips softly. I slowly remove my finger from her mouth. "It could grow on me, with time, *Assaisonnement* Antonio." She uses my title like a devout woman, and it is that word that makes me turn away.

"I have to go inside." I turn and try not to run to my door. When I look back, she is still watching me, with a look in her eyes that is completely unfamiliar to me. It is not a hunger like Contessa's. What is it?

As the days pass, I realize that I am thinking of Rosalinda more and more often. At first, I convince myself that she simply intrigues me. She is different from anyone else here, and so my attention is drawn to her. Anyone would be interested, in my situation.

I awake in the night to the sharp scent of cinnamon. My heart beats rapidly, and I rush to the window. Is she coming? I cannot see her, her glorious shape in the shadows drifting to me. Where is she? And so I realize: I am in love with her. Isn't this what they say love does to you? Finally, I know what it feels like, the terrible pain and pleasure all at once.

Finally, I have the knowledge I need for my plan.

Contessa is exhausted, sprawled across the bed beside me. The remains of the main course are scattered across the room in small brown splatters. I am so demolished that I cannot remember what I prepared. She is weak, in these moments. She never sleeps near me, unless she does when I fall asleep. She rarely lets me do even that. But she lets her defenses fall. Sometimes, she speaks to me.

I have meditated, even prayed on Gustave's advice, and the path seems clear before me. God must have guided me to Rosalinda, to the way she makes me feel. I think of Rosalinda, and blueprint of my plan becomes clear, thanks to Gustave's advice as well. There is one way to remind her that I am more than an instrument. "I love you, Contessa," I say.

She rolls over quickly to look at me. Her fear is unmistakable. "What? I didn't think you could . . . "

I laugh, my bitterness spilling out into the room. "I cannot be aroused. But I can love, Contessa. Come away with me." The lies are like acid on my tongue. It is the only way to save her, I tell myself. The only way towards freedom for the both of us.

"I can't," she begins to say, and then she sobs. It is as if I struck her across the face. "I can't . . . you can't . . . you are supposed to be His instrument!"

Stunned. I can't think of the words to respond to her accusation. She is a believer? "Contessa, I – "

She leaps out of the bed, gathering her clothes frantically. "I can't! I can't love His instrument! You can't! It's sacrilege. It's blasphemy!" She runs from the house, and my front door bangs behind her. I can hear her great, wracking sobs even as she runs up the path.

I lay back onto the bed, listening until the sounds fade away. I cannot think. What I feel, I cannot understand. Have I sinned? I turn away from the answer to my question before I can think it.

I wake to the sound of a quiet knock at the door. Good, I think, Contessa has come back. I can tell her it was all a lie. I think I understand now. Her search, through me, it terrified me. God has given me a challenge, and I have failed. Now, a second chance.

I hurry to the door, throw it open. Again, there is Rosalinda where I expect my *devoreuse*. The mixture of feelings in me resolves into something foreign, and alien. I want to reject it, expel it from my heart. It clings steadfast within in. I can feel my skin flushing for the first time. Rosalinda steps inside and slams the door behind her, shoving me backwards. I nearly stumble, then regain my footing.

I lay back onto the bed, listening until the sounds fade away. I cannot think. What I feel, I cannot understand



Have I sinned? I turn away from the answer to my question before I can think it



"Do you really love her?"

"What?" I cannot understand how these Escamilla women always say what I do not expect.

"She can't love you!" Rosalinda's voice is frantic. "You can't love her," she says more calmly. "It is against the rules."

"No," I say. "I can't. I don't."

"Then why did you tell her that you did? Are you trying to ruin yourself?" Her voice is shrill and incredulous.

"No," I nearly shout, and my words echo through the bungalow. I remember once thinking it large; now it seems so crowded. "I was – I am afraid of her," I whisper. "For her. At first, I thought she used me as a drug. Now, I know she wants something I can't give. Absolution. I don't believe."

Rosalinda shakes her head. Her black locks dance wildly with the vigorousness of it. "It's more complicated than that. She thinks God owes her an explanation, for . . . terrible things she has been through."

"I don't understand."

She sighs. "You have to tell her that you don't love her. You have to tell her the truth."

"I will," I say. The truth. It's rising in me now. The words are coming to my lips. "Rosalinda, I love *you*."

"Impossible," she says, looking away.

"Ever since you called me bitter," I say. "You're unlike any woman I have ever met. You don't succumb to me."

"So you fall in love? Over something so simple? I was only flirting, you idiot! I don't love you," she says.

"You're attracted to me," I say, desperate now. "You could love me."

"I was hoping to screw you, not *marry* you," she shouts. She begins to say something else, then closes her mouth and shakes her head, eyes squeezes shut. Her denial has torn me into pieces. I have nothing left to say.

She leaves, angry as she entered. After a moment, I follow her out the door and climb the path to the mansion. I stand beneath Contessa's window and shout to the darkened pane. "I don't love you! It was a lie! Forgive me! God will forgive you!"

After what seems like forever, I cannot remember who my words are meant for.

Near dawn, I stagger to my bed in a mindless daze and fall into a deep sleep. I awaken to the sound of footsteps, and squint out from beneath the covers. Señor Escamilla stands silhouetted by the window, his long black cane raised above his head. I lift my hands to cover my face, but the blows fall like iron hail. Pain blossoms and wilts across my body. "I" *snap!* "warned" *crack!* "you!" Escamilla's blows are furious. Before the cane strikes me across the head, I become dimly aware that I am screaming Rosalinda's name.

More loud hammering at the door rouses me to consciousness. I pull myself to my feet, gasping at the sharp pains in my sides, and stagger towards the door. I pass a fractured mirror in the foyer, fractured as my own appearance. A trail of crusted blood runs from my nose to the corner of my mouth. Both of my eyes are blackened, bloodshot as well. Bruises cover my torso, long purple strips the width of Escamilla's cane. I gingerly touch a rib and flinch. How had it come to this? How could I have strayed so far?

The knock again, softer now. I open the door carefully, just a crack. Gustave's broad face peers in. His rheumy eyes widen and the old chef gasps. He pushes in. I don't have the strength to resist, and fall back against the wall, sliding down into a crouch.

Gustave closes the door quietly. He wears ordinary clothes, not his working whites. A small bundle wrapped in real paper is tucked under his arm and crinkles quietly when he moves.

"Poor Antonio," Gustave whispers. He bends down to examine me. Indeed. Poor Antonio. I am the abused tool, snapped in half and thrown aside. A broken knife that has cut its master. "You'll never have quite the same good looks, but you will heal. The broken nose will give you *caractère*." He makes a failed attempt to smile.

"I can't be the priest or the ingredient any longer, my friend," I croak.

"No," Gustave agrees. "You cannot. They are all in agreement of this."

"They?"

"They think it would be best . . . " Gustave pauses. I feel his coming words chipping at me like ice picks " . . . if you were to be released from your contract, fully paid. They've sent me this." He offers me the bundle. "There's something there from me as well," the old man says quietly.

I cradle the bundle against my broken ribs and tug gently at the strings of the package with my free hand and teeth. The paper unfolds with soft whispers and a cool air scented with cinnamon. A bundle of crisp bills, clasped with a plastic band tumbles to the floor, along with a leather-bound book an inch thick – Gustave catches the book deftly and hands it to me. I can barely see the book through the tears in my eyes.

"Careful with this. It is very old," Gustave says.

"What is it?"

"These are my family recipes, going back eight generations. There are ingredients in them that don't exist anymore; I've penciled substitutions in the margins, you will see."

"I . . . can't accept this," I say, trying to speak around the hard lump in my throat.

"I know them all by heart. You'll need them. When you receive the reversal treatments, cooking will be different. You will have to relearn everything you know," Gustave says. "It was very hard for me. My grandmother gave me this book. I would have liked to teach the recipes to you myself . . . " I cannot bear to look up at him, my only friend, even after I have ruined things so thoroughly. "There's a cab waiting for you at the gate. Hurry now – it won't wait much longer. There's enough there to rehabilitate you, plus some." Gustave offers his hand to me, and I take it, climbing to my feet. The pain is almost unbearable.

"She should come with me," I say.

"I know you believe that you love her, my friend, but you do not. You only love what she can do for you. There may not seem to be a difference to you now, but one day, you will know the difference." Gustave nods to himself, and opens the door. "Go, friend. But one last bit of advice from an old man. There is an old French saying you must remember. "*Achat sur des pommes, vente sur le fromage.* Go." With a shove, he thrusts me out into the night.

I glance back up at the house as I jog through the ever-blossoming orange grove towards the gate. A small globe catches my eye, and I freeze. A single bright orange impossibly hangs from the tip of a branch. "Your ways truly are mysterious," I whisper.

I take one glance back at the mansion, wishing I knew what was said while I was unconcious. A silhouette stands illuminated in Contessa's window, and as I look, it is joined by another.

At the gate, I climb into the hovering cab, giving the driver a curt nod. The driver gives the cab lift and we begin to soar over the fields and to the east.

"Where should I put you down?" the cab driver asks. "Hospital?"

"Please."

"Sure thing."

All I can think about is Gustave's advice. An old saying among chefs, it was a rule of thumb for chosing wine. *Buy on apples, sell on cheese*, meaning apples can bring out the taste of a wine, and cheese can mellow it. I remember reading it in a cookbook once, but I have never needed it. My skin has always enhanced the wine like the apple. But soon, I will not. I will taste like any man, salty and bland.

My life has always been colored by the flavor of my skin. Gustave's words, I know I will keep with me as a reminder that it need not be that way. There are other flavors, other ways. It is good advice.

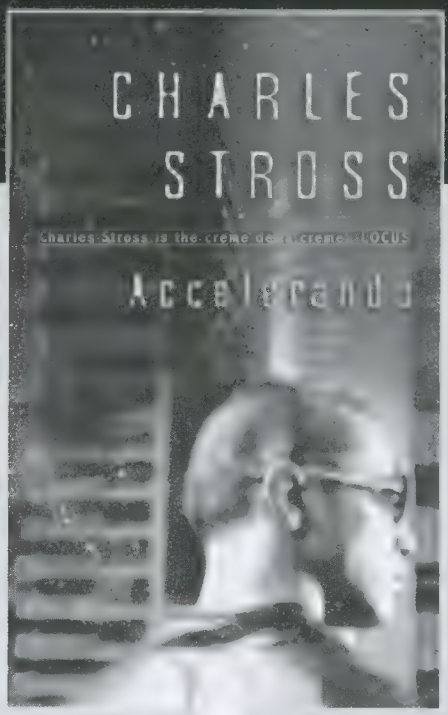
I cannot separate the aches in my body from the ache I feel in my soul. What will I do now? I think I will learn to feel more than this pain. And then, I will go looking for God. He owes me, after these years in his service.

I lay back into the seat and close my eyes as the Escamilla estate vanishes behind and below. I pray for His guidance. My prayer is wordless, but it has meaning. It is baptismal.

Jeremiah Tolbert is a writer, editor, and technologist living in the mountains of Wyoming, USA. Regarding 'This, My Body', he says: "The idea for this story came from the use of naked men and women as serving platters in some upscale sushi restaurants. But I don't think they make the food taste any better."



ANDY HEDGECOCK TALKS TO CHARLES STROSS ABOUT SPACE OPERA, POSTHUMAN INTELLIGENCE AND HABITABLE FUTURES



"I'm an intellectual flea: I bounce around all over the place and my bite isn't usually very deep. But I like to think breadth of coverage is more important than depth. I'm trying to paint on a broad canvas in lots of pretty colours to keep the readers entertained. Sometimes I do try to go deep, but please don't make the mistake of trying to take me too seriously.

"Reading fiction is an optional activity: you're competing for the reader's attention with a host of other recreational activities. So, if you don't make the experience compelling they walk away from the book, and any significant message you want to get across is wasted. Having said that: it's possible to entertain readers with scientific, philosophical and sociopolitical speculation. Different people find different ideas entertaining in different ways at different times."

Right now there's an apparently endless parade of writers hyped on the basis of an alleged talent for fusing philosophical provocation with compelling storytelling – particularly in the Science Fiction and Fantasy fields – but don't despair, Charles Stross is the real deal. His determination to engage and entertain is evident in the brisk style, slick pacing and sardonic humour of his novels *Iron Sunrise* and *Singularity Sky*. But his work is also characterised by a relish for exploring the boundaries of socio-technological possibility, a sharp eye for human

CHARLES STROSS: TAP-DANCING ON THE VERGE OF SATIRE

folly and an infectious enthusiasm for ideas – historical, political, scientific and cultural.

"I usually start writing by looking for something that interests me and trying to figure out how to convey that interest to the reader. It might be a couple of characters discussing the weather, or a Big Idea in the grand tradition of conceptual SF, like a rain of half-melted telephones. It might be lumbering under a freight of political speculation, or it might just be an amusing diversion, but if I can't present it in a compelling way I have to go and look for another seed idea. The one capital crime in the world of fiction is to bore your readers."

We're only half way through 2005, but it's already proving a massive year for Stross. February saw the publication of the first UK edition of his post-singularity space opera *Iron Sunrise* – taking ideas inspired by Vernor Vinge in a genuinely new direction – and a UK paperback of its predecessor *Singularity Sky*.

In June, *The Hidden Family*, a tale of biotech venture capital and alternate worlds, was published in the US to wide acclaim. Andrew Leonard, reviewing this second book in Stross's 'Merchant Princes' series for salon.com, said: "In a genre full of copycats, Stross is purveying that rarest of offerings, originality."

July brings the publication of *Accelerando*, based on a series of novellas originally published in *Asimov's Science Fiction*. In essence it's a postmodern family saga set in a Vingean singularity, with the clan's dysfunctional history being related by their robot cat.

Then there are this year's Hugo awards: Stross's 'The Concrete Jungle' and 'Elector' are both on the Best Novella shortlist, while *Iron Sunrise* is up for Best Novel.

So is Stross jubilant at the momentum with which he's gathering readers and critical plaudits? His reaction to the nomination of *Iron Sunrise* is sceptical, analytical and based on a need to constantly develop and keep exploring new territories.

"Actually I'd been trying to bury the Eschaton space opera series. Trying to reconcile the divergent impulses to write fun, fast-paced space opera, do political satire and handle the posthuman scale of the future is a difficult job and I've got other things to write. This doesn't mean I'm abandoning the series, but there will be other books in print before the next Eschaton novel appears.

"The publishing industry works in strange ways, and sometimes very slowly indeed. The novel that became *Singularity Sky* – originally titled *Festival of Fools* – was written in 1995–97. Back then I thought I'd have some harmless fun designing a setting for space operas that took into account some of the things we usually agree to ignore: how to handle the problem of causality violation, why there are many distinct and interesting human civilisations out there, how to deal with more than one means of FTL communication or travel (hey, if it's possible at all, why stop at just one?) and what to do about Vernor Vinge's singularity. Remember his first published essay on the topic came out in 1993, so at the time it was fresh and new.

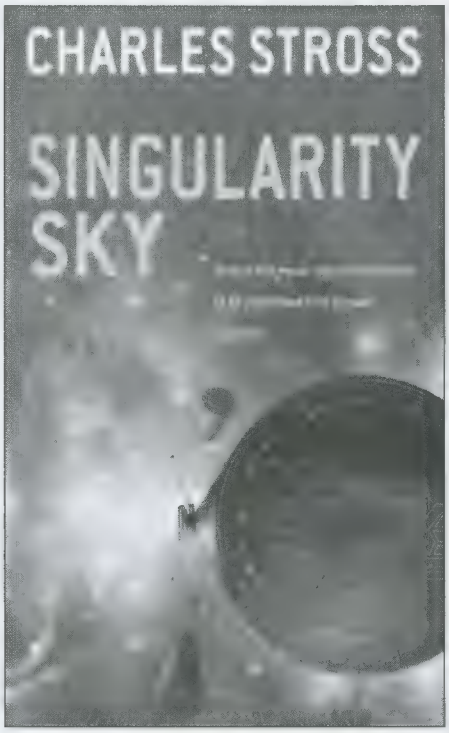
"But I made a couple of critical blunders. One was to figure out the kind of setting I wanted and then to work backwards. That universe isn't so much an exercise in rigorous extrapolation as it's an example of wishful thinking. Another was to pick on a post-human story arc in the background so vast it's virtually impossible to drag it into the foreground and depict it on a human scale. Space opera is always prone to plot inflation, but in my first two books I've made it fairly clear I'm focusing on relatively ordinary individuals in extraordinary circumstances – I don't have a lot of time for the cult of the omnipotent hero. Thirdly, I found myself tap dancing on the verge of satire. The everyday world we live in is surreal enough – trying to reflect that level of absurdity in a fictional form which is absurd in itself leaves you in perpetual danger of descending into slapstick, and tends to undermine any serious points you try to make. I'm in awe of Terry Pratchett for the way he's managed to have his cake and eat it: in the 'Discworld' books he has simultaneously colonised fantasy, satirised it and turned his satire into a serious vehicle of social criticism."

The reference to absurdity prompts me to ask Stross about one of his more bizarre riffs on character and history. The historical point of reference for Idi Amin Dadaist is clear, but what made the real Idi Amin such a compelling historical figure he forced his way into the narrative of *Iron Sunrise* by proxy?

"The Dadaist scene serves several parallel functions. Firstly, it's a show-not-tell rendition of Rachel's previous occupation, and tells us something about her character. Secondly, it sets up a certain nasty situation that is explained at the end of the book. Thirdly, it's a metaphor for the destructive will to power of the real villains in the narrative: 'give me what I want or the city (or planet) gets it.' If *Singularity Sky* was a poke at the beliefs of Straussian neoconservatives and monarchical traditionalists, then *Iron Sunrise* is about the will to power of the Nietzschean ubermensch – a profoundly infantile and unpleasant creed, when you strip away the jackboots and regalia, but one I feel we need to keep track of. One of the recurring characteristics of traditional space opera is power-worship, and in particular the hagiography of the authoritarian and inhumane power structures. To the extent that *Singularity Sky* and *Iron Sunrise* satirise the genre they work within, they have to satirise its politics."

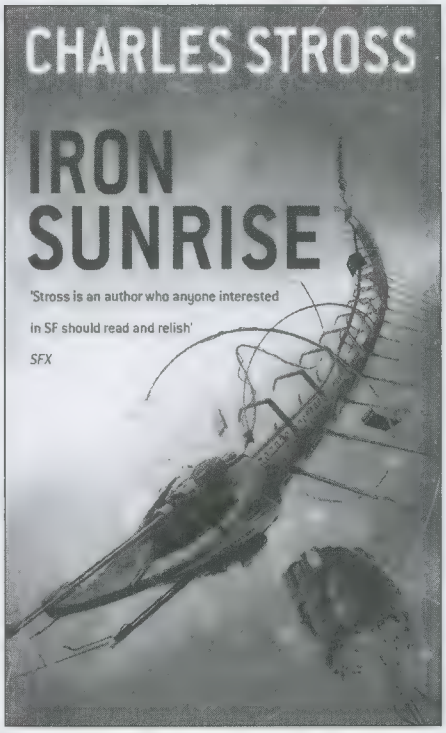
The pleasure of reading *Singularity Sky* and *Iron Sunrise* goes beyond the satire – Stross's deft melding of genre elements is enormously enjoyable too. I ask if he set out to sample and remix genre symbols and tropes from the outset, or if the process was dictated by the narrative itself.

"In 1995 I started out with the naïve and innocent idea of writing a fun space opera, pretty much content free. Unfortunately, I have difficulty doing content free: I get bored. I also have a warped sense of humour. Reality is, as I noted earlier, pretty strange. Traditional space opera didn't succeed well at reflecting that strangeness – there's a surfeit



AVAILABLE IN PAPERBACK FROM ORBIT





AVAILABLE IN PAPERBACK FROM ORBIT

of monolithic empires, small farming planets with a single cash crop and vast clashing fleets with strangely similar technology bases. We seldom see the splintered polities, the planet with a single world government, mass graves, unmarked areas on the map, or the equivalents of a Napoleonic navy (in space) meeting the equivalent of a nuclear hunter-killer submarine (in space).

"The narrative went through a lot of changes while I was writing *Singularity Sky*. It started out as a fairly traditional Napoleonics-in-space, as seen from the cynical point of view of a couple of moderns, slumming it in the boondocks – the Festival didn't show up until the second draft. By *Iron Sunrise*, I had a framework to work within – that's why it's a much more controlled novel, with much less space to throw in the random kitchen sinks, talking cats or whatever."

PERNICIOUS ASSUMPTIONS

The 'Merchant Princes' saga tackles political philosophy more directly than the Eschaton Books. Running through them is a deep vein of scepticism about untrammelled free market capitalism and the contemporary threat to the central values of the enlightenment. Stross has described himself as "a liberal who believes in the core enlightenment programme." I ask to what extent this worldview provided the satirical framework for the two books published so far (by Tor in the US):

"Merchant Princes is an extended metaphor about globalisation, development and the politics of imperialism, disguised as a fantasy series. And it's also a tale of intrigue and adventure set among backbiting post-feudals who can travel between time lines, with something of the feel of H. Beam Piper's *Paratime* and a stripped-down de-magicked version of Zelazny's *Amber*. The Clan come from a time line where the dark ages were extra-dark, the corpus of classical learning that, in our history, formed the seed of the renaissance was lost, and the world hasn't progressed much beyond a high medieval civilisation. *The Hidden Family* introduces another time line where industrialisation has occurred, but the absolutist monarchies have retained their grip on power and Burkean conservatives are seen as radicals: it's a world where democracy is stillborn. There's cross-fertilisation with our own world – or one extremely similar – where we appear to be in danger of being dragged into a post-democratic age by the development of unaccountable trans-national institutions. And there's an examination of the way trade between zones at different levels of technological and civil development affects the balance of power within those zones.

> "IT'S HARD TO PROJECT AN OPTIMISTIC FUTURE WHEN YOUR CIVILISATION IS COLLAPSING AROUND YOU"

"I'm not much of a political radical – I vote Liberal Democrat. That is, however, enough to get me labelled as part of the Scottish Socialist SF Writers Vanguard Party in the US. Nevertheless, I think there has been a serious drift in the field of political debate over the past couple of decades: the parties of both the right and left have bought into the pernicious assumption that free market solutions are applicable to all problems and, indeed, should be introduced into domains that have hitherto been market-free. Most of our personal interactions lie outside the market. We misapply the market – or, more seriously, the limited liability company, which functions internally as a petty dictatorship and, sometimes, as protective camouflage for sociopaths – at our peril."

So, does Stross introduce these ideas to his readers by design or does the speculation emerges organically from a need to explore his own understanding of the complexities of social, technical and political change?

"Sometimes the latter: *Accelerando* and *Glasshouse* are probably the most obvious examples of that, followed by the 'Merchant Princes' books. In *Accelerando* I tried to explore the human consequences of a Vingean Singularity from the inside, and to take a stab at defining some of the traits of posthuman and weakly superhuman intelligence. *Glasshouse* is, arguably, about revisionist approaches to history, the definition of victory in war and how we learn to forget. Hopefully there are some new ideas here,

but I'm not optimistic: never underestimate the parallel processing power of six billion hominids crunching dreams . . . "

I ask Stross to tell me more about *Glasshouse* and its progress towards publication.

"*Glasshouse* is finished. It will be on my editor's desk before this interview is in print, and it's due for publication early in 2006. It's a psychological thriller set roughly 500 years after *Accelerando*, possibly in the same universe, but no one can really remember. One side-effect of mind uploading and duplication into new bodies is that it's possible to modify people's memories. In the aftermath of the censorship war that shattered the interstellar Republic of Is, one man – a combat historian demobilised after spending the war as an armoured battalion – sets out to infiltrate an escape-proof prison in search of something. If only he could remember what."

And 2006 will see the publication of another new book from Stross. *The Jennifer Morgue*, a sequel to his blend of science fiction, Lovecraftian horror and the classic British spy thriller, *The Atrocity Archives*, does for the James Bond genre what the earlier book did for Len Deighton's Harry Palmer stories.

"The hero, who is a spy working for a very British secret service organisation, is a slashdot-reading computer-savvy hacker-geek who is more at home wielding a debugger than a gun. Do not look for deep significance in this book. Look out for zombies and cocktails – shaken, not stirred (because Bond has terrible taste)."

Like me, Stross grew up in a place that was undergoing a traumatic shift from industrial to post-industrial status. I wonder to what extent his early life in Leeds – and the massive degree of transformation and erasure the city was enduring – contributed to his worldview and approach to his craft.

"My worldview has been shaped by other aspects of my upbringing. I am Jewish by birth and upbringing – but a practising atheist – and my family isn't deeply rooted in this country. I also lived in London and the south-east for some years and now I'm more or less settled in Edinburgh. Erasure and transformation is just background noise: if anything, institutions and places that persist across decades or centuries seem stranger to me.

"It's probably worth noting that my educational and occupational background lies in the sciences. First I studied pharmacy, a devil's brew of biochemistry and the less anatomical aspects of medicine. I turned out to be a crap pharmacist, but in the meantime I'd developed an interest in computing and went back to university to study computer science. I ended up in the UNIX industry and then shifted into web technologies in 1994–5, just as the field was getting going. Along the way I've tried to keep up to date on the sciences – at least to the level of an interested lay person – and to fill in some of the gaps the English school educational system left in my background in the arts and history.

"Writing SF goes back to the mists of my prehistory: I began reading it at a very early age, thanks to the local library, and had more or less made up my mind I wanted to be an SF writer by the time I was twelve. I don't know why, and it doesn't strike me as any more bizarre than the desire of any other twelve-year-old to be a pop star or politician. What's bizarre is that I succeeded."

A HABITABLE FUTURE?

I invite Stross to draw on his long experience as a reader and writer and assess the future of the genre. Is it still an essential form for making sense of the flux of human experience? Do we need another paradigm shift to keep the genre relevant?

"I'd say there are two dominant trends in English language publications. The first is the stagnation and inward turning of American SF. This is by no means universal – you can't make universal statements about an entire country – but there is much less interesting and innovative work coming out of the US than one would expect. And there is a corresponding boom in consolatory literature: high fantasies, reactionary technothrillers, conspiracy thrillers – anything that tries to simplify the complexity of the world into black-and-white, heroes-and-villains, conspiracies-and-victims. The rise of the alternate history/counterfactual story is symptomatic of this: at its worst you can write it off as a revisionist attempt to make believe that history could have come right if only we'd done things slightly differently back then. I'm thinking particularly of the sub-sub-genre of 'the South wins the Civil War and everything turns out nice'. To make matters worse there's the terrible paranoia and political fear that has descended in the wake of 9/11, the Iraq War and the rise of the Texan Republican faction. People seem afraid to discuss real political issues over there.

"The second trend is clearly visible in the pages of this magazine: it's the astonishing and unprecedented boom in British SF and Fantasy. Ten or twenty years ago we'd have considered the New Weird to be a major movement in its own right. Today, it's just one of at least four parallel trends. I suspect that here in the UK we do still have our fingers on the pulse, because we're no longer writing against a background of looming shadows and the long retreat from empire. It's hard to project an optimistic future when your civilisation is collapsing around you, but in the UK the empire has gone and the future looks habitable again.

"These two trends raise the question of how we are going to deal with the near future. A number of issues are becoming pressing, and I don't see much discussion of them in contemporary SF. Peak oil is looming, biotechnology promises us something fictionally equivalent to a basic nanotechnology-based industrial system within a decade or so and 'hard' nanotechnology is coming along. China is gearing up to start mass-producing pebble-bed reactors. Small companies in America are trying to commercialise surface-to-orbit travel. And a few weeks ago another corporation announced it was opening a factory for carbon nanotubes – with the ultimate goal of building a space elevator.

"This isn't our future, it's our present. Space elevators, nanotechnology and oil at $200 a barrel – that's this decade. We've got Bruce Sterling – the most prescient SF writer in America today – taking a year out to teach industrial design because we're just around the corner from the low-volume easily-customised manufacturing the Tofflers were rabbiting on about in *Future Shock* and *The Third Wave* back in the 1970s and 1980s. There are at least three universities trying to develop cargo-cult Von Neumann machines – workshops that can fabricate any other artefact, including their own components, with minimal human oversight and direction.

"If the period from 1910 to 1970 was all about speed and power, and 1960 through 2010 was the golden age of data, then it's reasonable to suppose we're moving into the age of biomimetics – mechanisms like life forms. That's assuming the peak oil crisis doesn't irreversibly damage our civilisation, which has the alarmingly unprecedented feature of being the only one currently in play on the planet."

WIN! FIVE COPIES OF ACCELERANDO UP FOR GRABS > PAGE 5



NICK LOWE MUTANT POPCORN

Each night, the same dream. You come down one morning in your dressing gown, and the intellectual property developers are at your gate with the bulldozers. You start to remonstrate, but the ground gives way and you find yourself falling, falling through darkness into the bottomless caverns of development hell. Around you is a flapping of things unseen; you try to scream, but only a squeak comes out. You've become one more nameless creature in a flock of dangling, forgotten things that will never see the light of day.

There must have been an epidemic of sleep disorders at Warners since 1997. The *Batman* movie franchise is dead; we saw it die. Nothing could have survived the plunge into the abyss of the two Schumacher instalments. And yet, these old properties have a life of their own. Deep in the foundations, the Wayne legacy survives, its investment protected by an arsenal of development models: what wise old Lucius Fox decribes as "defence projects, consumer products: all prototypes, none in production at any level whatsoever." There was a Frank Miller script for a screen version of his *Batman: Year One*, as well as a treatment by the Wachowskis. Catwoman was in these, when she wasn't being spun off in a development hell of her own, or stalking our screens in a still more hellish form. It was never a secret that the Wayne industry had invested too much to pronounce its heir dead, and all this while has been funding a worldwide search for the heir to the *Batman* property. Now at last the family name lives again, starting up and over like a bat out of development hell, and propelled by a mission to clean up.

Batman Begins is a considerably tamer film than some of the discarded versions, and indeed than the less slick, more neck-risking Burton films; but it's so much better than the Schumacher sequels that it's impossible to wish it anything but well. It catches a fantastically able director and star on the cusp of their A-list breakthrough, and nobody seems to have blinked at the idea of casting all the established characters with non-Americans. And in fact most pay off handsomely, though I'm not sure Tom Wilkinson was put on this earth to play a sinister Italian-American mob boss, and even in the world of clandestine global superterrorism one does blink a little at a Bhutanese Arab with a French name and an Irish accent. But at the very least Christian Bale is far and away the best actor who isn't poor George Clooney ever to play Batman. Phenomenally good at playing ludicrous characters straight, Bale has an odd way of being strongest in his silliest films, which means that *Batman Begins* is never going to reach the giddy heights of *Equilibrium* or *Reign of Fire*. He suffers, as all superleads must, from the Peter Parker problem: Bruce Wayne is always going to be a far more interesting character than Batman, and there's a limit to how much acting even Bale can do with his unaided chin, which never really recovers from shaving off the *Reign of Fire* beard. But he's a fantastic catch for the franchise, and deserves all success.

The weakness is that it's still very much a tentpole studio movie, without a dangerous bone in its Kevlar-clad body. Though director Chris Nolan takes a co-writing credit, the final script is very similar to the draft that slipped out under David Goyer's solo name a year or so previously: a slick, pacy collage of characters and concepts from DC's bulging bat-catalogue, with Miller's version at the front of the mix but a significantly less grungy, more high-tech and supervillain-friendly aesthetic. Here the prodigious villain consumption of the Burton-Schumacher cycle has left Goyer



SIN CITY > BATMAN BEGINS

and Nolan with some rather unpromising bin-ends to pick from, though they've chosen wisely, resisting higher-profile candidates for a pair that actually fit well into the thematic arc, with Cillian Murphy's Scarecrow especially fine. (A female lead has been more of a problem, and the custom-made Katie Holmes character isn't an entirely happy solution.) But as you'd expect from *Blade* veteran Goyer, *Batman Begins* has replaced Miller's messy Eisnerverse of mobsterism, police corruption, and systemic urban decay for a cleaner, more traditionally comicsy hierarchy of evil, under which all crime in the city is organised crime, and you simply have to climb the ladder of revelations and set pieces through the henchmen and underlings to punch out first the big boss, then the supervillain for whom he works, and climactically the super-supervillain behind him. Corruption, economic depression, civic breakdown are all revealed as part of the League of Shadows conspiracy: "Over the ages our weapons have become more sophisticated. With Gotham we tried a new one – *economics*." In other words, Ra's Al Ghul really did kill Bruce's father – not directly, but by creating Joe Chill as a by-product of his dirty war against all that Thomas Wayne stood for. It's a clever finesse, and fits perfectly into a 2005 model of evil in which global supervillains will destroy our economy and poison our drinking water unless we work outside the law against them; but it directly undermines the whole purported lesson of Bruce's pilgrimage. "You travelled the world to understand the criminal mind and conquer your fear; but the criminal mind is not complicated, and what you fear is within you." That would indeed be a scary thought.



In a nicely-timed thumb of the nose, the Frank Miller vision rejected by *Batman Begins* gets its own showcase in **Sin City**, a defiantly rule-breaking piece of filmmaking that unflinchingly cinematises the Miller voice and vision in ways that celebrate rather than mask its persistent nastinesses: the casual sadism, the overwrought machismo, the fetishising of psychopathic cruelty. Beneath overwritten voiceover, underwritten plots and characters pout, pose, and grunt out lines like "Kill him for me, Marv; kill him good," all magnificently "shot and cut" (as the credits have it) in high-contrast spot-coloured supernoir by irrepressible co-director Robert Rodriguez. On the principle that violence can be more graphic the more it looks like graphics, the screen is sprayed with industrial drumloads of brilliant white emulsion in a series of beatings and torture scenes that punch you repeatedly in both eye and stomach. Utterly beautiful, stupid, and repellent, it's a bold cross-media collaboration between two genius craftsmen and visionaries at their absolute brilliant worst, and sucks you resistantly in despite the underweight, overblown storylines and ludicrous chest-banging vigilantism. If you like films where Bruce Willis emasculates the bad guy with his bare hands in graphic detail while an onlooking Jessica Alba's half-smile says My kinda MAN!, then this is totally the movie for you, though possibly not for your girlfriend.

In contrast to *Sin City*'s deranged fidelity to its source's auteur vision, there's never been a more depressing demonstration of how the development process can beat the living pulp out of a once-priceless heirloom of intellectual property than the sorry piece of zero-comedy space flotsam that comes calling itself **The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy**. In a grimly ironic replay of the fate of our world, the plot we knew has been demolished in the name of progress and reconstructed at vast expense in what claims to be a working replica. But in this case what's come out the other end is a *Thunderbirds* job, a wretched simulation of what an infinite number of studio monkeys imagine a successful film to demand: relationship-oriented emotional journeys (there goes another perfectly good sickbag), characters with angst and emotional



'It's all an affecting love-letter to what space fiction has meant for the postwar generation of master geeks who saw (and helped) SF move from the ghetto of pulp magazines to the flagship genre of popular cinema'

STARS WARS III > THE JACKET > STRINGS

conflict, and a life-affirming happy ending where our hero gets the girl and his world is literally put back together.

It's all a bit of a trip to the dentist, frankly. Adams himself was far from averse to dismantling and reassembling the *Hitch-Hiker's* plot for different media over the years, and the production has been keen to validate itself by asserting its continuity with the great man's own later screenplay drafts. Indeed, one of the sad things about this film is the suspicion it raises that Adams himself may be responsible for some of the flatfalling new material, though it's hard to believe he'd have been so unprotective of his jokes, dialogue, and tone. Rightly or wrongly, it's been the books that have made the deepest cultural penetration, so that the film maps on to the first book rather than the first radio series – with the consequence that the Milliways episode, high point of the original conceptual and comedic arc, is never attained. But how could anyone, anywhere, have ever thought the new business with Marvin's arm or the lemon-squeezer was funny? Throughout, tattered remains of once-amusing jokes have been draped sparely over a carcass picked clean of wit by years of development, their structure and timing repeatedly punctured by ill-judged attempts at pacier dialogue economy. The location of the demolition plans for Arthur's house have had the punchline streamlined out; Slartibartfast's fjordologue has been filleted; and Deep Thought is limited to one "you're not going to like it." It's easy to see how nervous people around a script table could find the leisurely, radio-paced gag writing a bit slack for today's film dialogue; but sometimes less is just less.

At least nobody could lay charges of overdevelopment against the enthusiastic Scots-made loonybin fantasy **The Jacket**, which has brain-damaged Desert Storm vet Adrien Brody banged up for someone else's killing in crazed Dr Kristofferson's asylum for the criminally overacting. There he's subjected to timebending experiments with non-approved hallucinogens, which propel him into a future where he's been dead for fifteen years and Keira Knightley is American. What is real? Can he change it? How did he die? Why does she keep making faces like a goldfish? Where exactly is this enigmatic part of the US that looks like a composite of Canada with fleeting inserts of Glasgow? These and other thrilling questions go largely unanswered in the film, which has the two-drafts-and-a-polish bish-bosh feel of most Britflick scripts, never quite making logical or narrative sense, but giving it a dreamlike, offbalance quality that becomes a vital part of the texture – along with our hero's obliviousness to the fact that, apart from Kristofferson and a sub-par Jennifer Jason Leigh, everyone around him is an alien, with star turns in particular from Daniel Craig and the meticulously voicecoached Knightley. Far more enjoyable, imaginative, and completely off its trolley than any *Gothika*-style studio vamp on the same riff, it positively thrives on its inability to mimic American film convincingly enough to be dull.

Weird little homegrowns don't come any more so than the astonishing Danish puppet fantasy **Strings**, whose rather slack story explores the fascinating logic and mythology of a universe of puppets. Birth comes when parents carve children, and attach strings which go up out of sight into an unseen world from which they bring life and purpose; death comes with the fraying (or severance) of the head string; and a whole fantasy world and culture is spun from this elegant sideways premise. It takes a while to shake off the uneasy sense of being trapped in a zero-irony version of *Being John Malkovich*, but it's conceptually and visually ravishing, with beautiful wood-carved (not moulded) characters, and a daring appetite for all the things that *Team America* spoofed as impossible to do credibly with puppets: love scenes, fights, crowds, battles, and even a scene of real swimming in actual water. The plotting is frankly wooden and manipulated from above by a jerking apparatus of oracles, dreams, and prophecies, and disappointingly for sf sensibilities there's

no real conceptual breakthrough; we never find out, and nobody seems particularly curious, where the strings go. But it's a brave, mad, and haunting film that does extraordinary things with its unfashionable marriage of media ancient and modern.

But of course the most resonant origin story of the season is the donning of black cape and mask as an icon of darkness is born. For all its embarrassments, I don't see how **Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith** could be seen as anything other than a triumphant capstone to the one long-lived franchise that has never danced to any studio's tune – resisting all the pressures to make its dialogue speakable, its characters dimensional, its storylines complex, and instead throwing everything into the quest to push the limits of filmmaking technology to make the most exhilarating live space opera an audience has ever witnessed. The opening vistas alone, of moving through flotillas of cyclopean spacecraft in orbit with a spinning world below, are the magnificent gratification of a primal SF hunger drip-fed over three generations by a combination of illustration and imagination that film has always struggled to match. Three years ago we were picking bits of eyeball out of the backs of our skulls after *Attack of the Clones* upped the planet count to five, when no earlier *Star Wars* film had attempted more than three. And now here *Sith* comes along with twelve, with a thirteenth (Dagobah) only dropped from the closing scenes in post-production. It's all an affecting love-letter to what space fiction has meant for the postwar generation of master geeks who saw (and helped) SF move from the ghetto of pulp magazines to the flagship genre of popular cinema. But it's also an elegy, the last and greatest of a breed of galactic epic that flared into dazzling life a generation ago, but is sputtering now even in its latterday television refuge. Of the 88 fantasy films I've seen between *Episodes II* and *III*, space travel has featured only in six (*Star Trek Nemesis*, *Treasure Planet*, *Solaris*, *Thunderbirds*, *Chronicles of Riddick*, and *Hitch-Hiker's*), and most of these are belated derivatives from intellectual property a generation or more old.

Of course it's unable to be more than a *Star Wars* film, just as *Batman Begins* is stuck with being a Batmovie. The human cast who put up such a brave, doomed fight in earlier episodes have lost the war against their mechanical opponents; the performer who comes off best in *Episode III* is Yoda, though there's a small milestone in General Grievous' emergence as the first coarse droid actor. Yet more than ever, the famous Lucasian script longueurs are a positive asset, forcing the long, flat, barely speakable conversations to be framed against dazzling bluescreen backdrops, some of which seem to have been entirely made up in post-production. (It's never really clear what those abstract pink plasma balls are that Anakin and Palpatine are droning away in front of; the script specifies something called "the Mon Calamari ballet doing Squid Lake.") Naturally one regrets the tragic betrayal of the promise that was Natalie Portman's character in *Episode I*, now sentenced to waddle around and blub before going out with a whimper in a remarkably bloodless space Caesarean (evidently drawing on the same self-cauterising technology used in lightsabre duelling); while as a study in evil and failure the Darthification of Annie is more interesting for what it tries to do than what it delivers. The ponderous political ruminations on tyranny and empire are generally less bold than in *Episode II*, but it's a clever touch to make the turn to the dark side a consequence of a magnified and manipulated fear for one's own, in which "If you're not with me then you're my enemy." Obi-Wan's snapback to this, "Only a Sith deals in absolutes," is rather good; but like the Coruscant cityscapes with sky-cars flitting through the night, it has a fatally old-fashioned feel. The Jedi way is being driven underground; for now, the franchise belongs to the dark knights ■



SIN CITY

MAGIC FOR BEGINNERS
KELLY LINK
Northampton, Massachusetts: Small Beer Press, 250pp, $24

ROCKET SCIENCE
JAY LAKE
Auburn, Washington: Fairwood Press, 224pp, $17.99

A PRINCESS OF ROUMANIA
PAUL PARK
New York: Tor, 368pp, $24.95

JOHN CLUTE SCORES



BOOK WORLDS

We have a paradox here. Or maybe a life sentence. It's been clear for a long while that those of us who remain in our right minds in 2005 are no longer able to affirm in our hearts the cluster of story and admonition and memory which kept our world together until World War One gut-shot the West. Since 1914, that story cluster has done little more than uriah-heep a long dying. The culture of the West in 2005 is an *unction*. It does really seem to me that, over a fairly long life, I've been inhabiting a death-aria. I'm way not alone in feeling that the old Big Stories – politics, democracy, Christianity, justice, Progress, nuclear family, Ism – have gotten maggoty from Aftermath. I'm way not alone in not believing a single word of what we continue to be told by the bloodmouths in suits, in feeling that the world has become bricolage and zombies, badlands and clone zones, global warming and nice little earners. The old (viz this paragraph) sputter with rage, or freeze into coffin spasms (like poor ancient OCD George Lucas trying to slam the door of the world shut with *Star Wars*); the rich (as in Hugh Nissenson's great *The Song of the Earth* from 2001) fester in their Keeps; and the young dance down streets whose diseases waste them. So why are we smiling?

I think the survival of human beings in a world designed by other human beings is a triumph of the human spirit. That alone is reason enough to smile at fellow survivors. Life today may be more profoundly idiolectic than ever before, the Big Story may stink in the nostrils, and the fractal shite that rides the information-winds may make idiots (in the classic sense) of us all, but it is sometimes more *fun* to be alive now than maybe ever. Breakfast in the Ruins: a life to live for, maybe. It does strike me – reading 21st century literature in general, and the books on review this time round in particular – that maybe the writers of the fantastic, which is almost any writer not senile, are beginning to create life sentences for people who are alive now and who want to hear about others who are alive now, no matter how absurd it might seem to tell any story at all in a world whose Big Stories are tripe. The little fibs our storytellers tell differ radically from the Big Stories we can no longer stomach: because the Big Stories, which are in any case contaminate, do not know they are stories. We are long past a time when mimetic novels about the here and now – novels which, like the Big Stories they spaniel, deny that a story is being made up – could be written with a po face. 21st century fiction increasingly conveys two truths: that a story told is exactly a *story* which is *told* and knows it (while of course believing it utterly); but also that a tale does not have to be 'true' in order to make good sense about the lives we must imagine for ourselves, here in the Land of Fable.

Much too late to get my copy into the previous column (IZ198), I made a couple of suggestions about how to describe Rana Dasgupta's *Tokyo Cancelled* (which I'd been reviewing). Dasgupta's fine 'story artifact' seemed (I thought) interestingly similar to some other recently published assemblages of angularly adjacent tales, including David Mitchell's first three fictions (a fourth is due later this year) and Chuck Palahniuk's *Haunted* (2005). It seemed to me that something very fruitful might be happening; that we might be witnessing the signs of a pragmatic creative response to the fractalised surface of the worlds we now inhabit: that books like this, which might be definable in terms of 'instructed chaos', worked as a body English of the realities Neal Stephenson – in *Cryptonomicon* (1999) – foresaw. Books like this were like ratkings: every tail a tale to tell. They were distributed-network psychopomps.

Not all books are distributed-network psychopomps (this will not come as a surprise). Neither Jay Lake's weirdly joyful exercise in faux retro-SF, or Paul Park's superbly anfractuous negotiation between the real world and ours (ours being a book which is told) fit the bill. The guidance they afford is all about how to leave. But Kelly Link's second collection, **Magic for Beginners**, is very much an assemblage of angularly adjacent tales, though without any overall framework or platform. A cacophony of story types, some of them so profoundly adjacent they share the telling of the same story, tangles together into what feels almost like an armamentarium. The experience of being able to experience the range of Link's tales is, certainly for me, something new. Her previous collection, *Stranger Things Happen* (2001), seemed to gain much of its dislocating strength out of a refusal to add up. In my review of the book, I found these tales as disruptive as almost any by Robert Aickman (1914–1981), an author whose Strange Tales uncannily presage a world (ours) whose Big Story turns any life it touches (ours) into kipple. It may be little more than what happens when you get used to a writer, but the stories assembled in *Magic for Beginners*, all of them published after the release of *Stranger Things Happen*, seem somehow post-kipple; for good and for ill, they seem far more *professional* than

her earlier work, far more presentational, far more conscious that they have a job to do.

The author whose oeuvre I think of now as a more significant precursor of this work – I mentioned him in my earlier review, and would not be surprised if he's been mentioned a lot – is Donald Barthelme (1933–1989). Both writers create tales which render the relationship between America and its denizens in terms of vaudeville: as a series of skits in which the same (or highly similar) characters appear again and again in front of the drop curtain, changing their clothes (and maybe their sexes) each time we see them, each time we hear them declaim a new list of things of the world precariously dense with being as long as the list is remembered, each time they tell us how to get from A to B in a world which has become ultimately unmappable. But the show must go on. Both Barthelme and Link seem to share a sense that to render the show of life as a succession of literal routines – and to make explicit their characters' awareness that each routine is a story they must both inhabit and *name* – is a natural way to make storyable the shatteredness of the culture of America, which is where the Western World has gone to die. Moreover, both authors tend to assume quite idiomatically (and maybe a little haphazardly) that, under their Clowns-R-Us greasepaint, we can sort of inevitably detect Real Tears – because vaudeville is a masque of lacrimae rerum, which it outs, after all. Certainly it is a good instinct to assert that the show must go on, that life is a Cabaret, old chum. It is also very close to a cliche.

Moreover, if one person can don a guise, so can her husband. *Magic for Beginners* – certainly the title story, with its chilly haunted echoes of William Wharton's *Franky Furbo* (1989), also about a world-dancer fox – can almost be read as a series of lessons in how various quick-change-artist characters are able to dress their selves self in order to survive, in order to jive the kipple. Maybe a little too often – as in 'Some Zombie Contingency Plans', whose protagonist outsources the glaring vacuum in his heart through a series of pre-emptive assaults on the zombies of the world, who are pretty well you and me – there is something almost a bit weepy in all of this. Link does have something of a sweet tooth for hollow Pierrots. But the better stories are entirely different. 'Lull' and 'Stone Animals', both first published in *Conjunctions*, are two of the very finest long tales yet seen this century. The stays of the vaudeville skit loosen here, and expand, so that every sentence tells, like a pool when you drop a pebble into its heart, changing endlessly. The intersections of damaged lives, the permutative transforms of animal into human and back again, of player into played, of human being into hand, of hand into weaver and back again, mutate without remission in the mind's eye. So *Magic for Beginners* is a mixed bag: nostrums and soundings, tap dancing and taps, a voice stopping too often for applause, but then in the heart of the day a still small voice whose burden is endless, far deeper than zombies.

It would be very easy to stop reading **Rocket Science**, which is Jay Lake's first novel, long before it lets its cat out of the bag and saves its bacon. For rather too long, it looks as though he has been doing finger exercises, that *Rocket Science* is just another rote evocation of the famously collectible 20th century and of all the stories that tell us what we've all been missing down to the last detail. The first half of the book gives few hints (a second reading might find more) that this smooth and easy retro SF juvenile set in 1945 in a style not far adrift from Robert A. Heinlein's does, after all, have a poison heart.

Because of his childhood polio, young Vernon Dunham (who narrates) has sat out World War Two at home in Augusta, Kansas, which seems to be a typical American town, full of typical small-city folk who know who they are, who know that their own lives are pretty much like every one else's stories. They would recognize themselves in this book. But when Vernon's childhood friend, Floyd Bellamy, returns from combat, where he claims to have performed heroically, Vernon begins to fall through the book of this world, into another book. He knows that Floyd is a flake and a liar, though he loves him; and is apprehensive when Floyd embroils him in a scheme which seems to involve not only handling stolen goods – a large German artifact Floyd claims to have lifted from some military site – but also engaging in what may be treason, as a team of revanchist Germans is looking for the artifact, which may help them restart World War Two.

As soon as it is uncovered, any 21st century reader who has ever read a book of the sort that *Rocket Science* seems to be miming will know that Floyd's German artifact is in fact a spaceship, and probably has an alien stashed away in its superscientifc innards. This is all pretty routine, all seemingly part of the nostalgia trip. But very subtly, and without ever making anything exactly explicit, *Rocket Science* begins to darken and twist out of sight. The first thing we learn is that Augusta is a much lousier and more violent place to inhabit than Heinlein would have allowed in the 1940s. The local sheriff and Vernon's childhood doctor – both figures who normally represent a deep ontological security in any tale of this sort involving foreign agents – dissolve at a touch into figures of menace; Vernon's father is savagely beaten, apparently by an Army officer; Floyd's father turns out not to be ill at all but a murderous freelance assassin gone to ground, along with his cronies, all of whom superficially resemble a cast of extras out of our dream of rural America, but all of whom are equally double. Almost everyone in Augusta – everyone Vernon has known all his life – turns out to have been masquerading their Augustan surface lives; beneath the surface of Augusta lies the maelstrom, the true 20th century, the Hell we made of Civilization.

The second thing we notice is that the spaceship is not the kind of spaceship that a writer in 1945 – who had never heard of transistors or AIs – might have dreamt up. When Vernon describes the interior of 'Pegasus' in his own voice, we find ourselves caught up as readers in an extremely complex dramatic irony. We of course know that in an SF story of this sort, certain futuristic inventions will be imagined; but in *Rocket Science* that 1945 SF language is used knowingly to *misdescribe* the *real* future, where we live now. Vernon's attempts to render what he sees are, therefore, unsettlingly poignant, because he's just two feet short of the well; he *almost* describes the modern world which the SF of 1945 dreamt of, but being a figure in a 1945 SF novel (however faux) he can't:

> The inside of Pegasus resembled the world's largest vacuum tube. It was much larger than I would have thought from the outside. . . . Twisted shapes as unsettling as the exterior lines of the computational rocket [a term he uses to explain the fact that the ship is sentient] cast strange shadows across the entire cabin, and nothing was level or true, not even the dec . . .
>
> Purple white and orange lights flickered in patterns and

sequences across the faces of curved panels gathered round the seats . . . A white column of light rose from a low platform in the middle of the cabin just behind the seats, with a shifting diagram of color-coded curves and vectors displayed within it. The whole thing looked like a three-dimensional movie, if such a thing were possible . . .

We were in a marvel of engineering and design, surrounded by achievements of engineering principles that were years, decades, perhaps centuries ahead of anything that could be done on Earth.

And so on.

There is one final turn of the screw. Vernon asks the grounded ship how it can generate aerial images of the surrounding territory:

Pegasus's voice echoed from the cabin walls, instead of whispering behind my ear. "False-color low-light imaging from massively redundant low-bandwidth atmospherically dispersed microspore telemetry units. You may think of that as smart dust."

This is of course gibberish to Vernon in 1945, and for an instant we think of it as a kind of joke. But it is not. Because Vernon is an artifact of Jay Lake. In a tale really written in 1945, we would be feeling around now a sense of release, because Vernon is about to make a conceptual breakthrough that will change things on Earth. In *Rocket Science*, Vernon *cannot* make that conceptual breakthrough: all he can do, faced with our real future, is guess wrong. He's trapped – trapped in the nightmare of the 20th century, trapped in plague-breath Augusta, trapped by his own archaic concepts, trapped in a story that – just as the protagonists of Vernor Vinge's *A Deepness in the Sky* (1999) are trapped just short of the Beyond – cannot let him out.

Or so it seems. But Lake is softer than Vinge. *Rocket Science* turns out, suddenly and warmingly, to be a tale of escape: from Kansas, from 1945, from the horrors of history, from the bloodmouths in suits, and from SF. It is a tale which does not make sense until it ends, until Vernon leaps out of our past and into the Beyond. It makes the Beyond seem possible again.

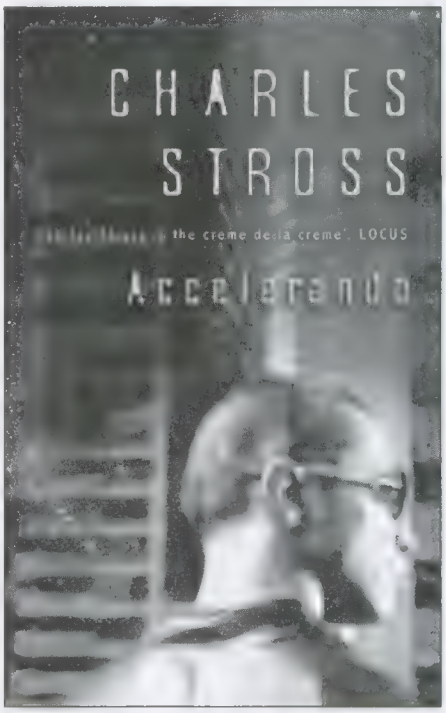
Paul Park's A Princess of Roumania may well constitute the first 368 big pages of a very long, great story; indeed, the second volume of the sequence, to be called *The Tourmaline*, is announced on Tor's dustjacket flap. And it is for this reason that I am not going to do Park the discourtesy of attempt-ing to review *A Princess of Roumania* here. Next year – assuming that *Interzone* and Tor and I still exist – I would like to spend a long time on what could become one of the most engrossing fantasies ever written: we will see. These opening pages have a sustained brilliance it is extremely difficult to convey; they comprise perhaps the most taxing and densely intricate exegesis yet put to paper of an old warhorse trope that has initiated hundreds of fantasies: the passage, usually through some sort of portal or threshold, from our world into a world of fantasy. In this case however, it is our own world which is contained in a book, our world which is a story told; and it is the other world – a world seemingly dominated by Germany, though Roumania is far more ontologically dense in this world than Romania is in the tedious terrible world we dwell in here – which is the default, inhabited by heroes and villains, witches and mages, peasants and soldiers far realer than anyone over here.

Why Miranda Popescu has had to escape to our book world, where she has lived in Massachusetts from the age (it seems) of three; under what calculus of metamorphoses her friend Andromeda accompanies her in the shape of a large dog, and her other friend Peter grows an arm in the real world to replace the stump he was born with; how and why she is kidnapped/cajoled/transformed upwards and inwards back into the density of the real world, we are not told. Nor do we begin to understand how it is that the true shape of self of each character in the novel somehow inhabits the interior of a lesser false shape of self and walks in that lesser shape along the shores of our lesser world, we do not understand and we wish to know. What is happening here: sea-change or phoenix or Jekyll or what? I am sure Park knows, and the natural continuation of the story truncated here will surely turn on some deep grammars of transform. The story so far of *A Princess of Roumania* is intense, contorted, distorting, hypnotic; it seems deeply thought- and felt-through – as far as we are allowed to follow it. It is a book – well, anyway, *A Princess of Roumania* is a prelude – to read in a deep silent room, so you don't miss a word.

What we are missing of course, and it's not Paul Park's fault, is the rhythm and continuation and flow and climax of story itself. So, as I said above, I'm not really going to review the book. Some of the novels Tor has broken into two or three for marketing purposes – Gene Wolfe's *The Wizard Knight* (2004), Scott Westerfeld's *Succession* (2004), Charles Stross's *The Merchant Princes* (2004–2005) – break more or less naturally into more than one part. Park's novel does not, and it was a very bad idea to slice it open like this. *A Princess of Roumania* is untimely ripp'd. I for one have exactly not had enough. I am going on strike.

Next year then.

NOVELS



ACCELERANDO
CHARLES STROSS
Orbit hb, 400pp, £16.99

Niall Harrison writes: There can't be many people left by now who haven't heard of *Accelerando*. Charles Stross's sixth novel, which collects and reworks a multiple award-nominated short story cycle originally published in *Asimov's*, could fairly be described as one of the most anticipated books of the year. And for good reason: *Accelerando* is a clear step up from Stross's other work.

The central story is a family saga, the story of three generations of the brilliant, idiosyncratic Macx family, living through a twenty-first century defined by intense and rapid change. Manfred lives for tomorrow. He's a meme-broker; earns his living by giving away ideas for free, planning for the 'very long term – at least twenty, thirty years'. By the 2020s Amber, Manfred's daughter, is the teenage queen of an independent nation in Jovian orbit. A few more decades down the line we meet Sirhan, son of Amber (or one instance of her), living on a lily-pad city in the upper atmosphere of Saturn, and casting wary glances at an inner solar system radically changed by a runaway intelligence spike.

One of the most impressive things about *Accelerando* is how believable the journey is. The nine stories knit together well and the progression, though startling, is coherent. The book rides on wavefronts of ideas, between the consequences of old and the emergence of new, taking the reader straight through the heart of a singularity. It's essentially a reinvention of future history; Stross can plausibly tell in a century a story that, twenty years ago, might have spanned millennia.

In doing so, he has produced a remarkable work, one that taps into a pervasive modern anxiety about change. How people deal – or don't – with change; how they react to a world which no longer needs them; how they try to make a mark when history is happening as fast as it can be recorded, or if identity becomes a variable, not a constant. *Accelerando*'s examination of these questions is informed by an unflinching and perceptive understanding of our technological present.

The influence of cyberpunk, particularly a work like Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix*, is clear, but Stross's colours are brighter and bolder. His prose is never going to be called beautiful (it's too dense, too jagged, too *geeky* for anyone to allow that), but it brims with effortless verve and humour – and then every so often the full scope of the narrative, and its implications, will hit you. Welcome to millennium three, decade one: science fiction isn't the same any more.

GODPLAYERS
DAMIEN BRODERICK
Thunder's Mouth Press pb, 328pp, $14.95

Peter Loftus writes: August Seebeck has been living with his Aunt Tansy in Melbourne ever since his parents were killed in a plane crash. All is well and good, until Tansy reports that corpses have been turning up in her bathtub every Saturday night. As intrigued as we are by this strange set-up, August takes it upon himself to wait up and get to the bottom of the mystery. In the small hours, a body is shoved in through the second story window of the bathroom, followed by the most beautiful woman August has ever seen, and he is drawn into an adventure that spans the multiverse.

Broderick tells us in the Afterword that he wanted this novel to rekindle an interest in Roger Zelazny, and it does, in the beginning, bear a strong resemblance to Zelazny's *Amber* series. August discovers that he can open portals to other spheres, and he travels from one sphere to the next, meeting the siblings he never knew he had. All of these are players in The Contest of Worlds, Vorpal Entities with powers beyond comprehension.

Indeed, August's quest quickly becomes one of comprehension, as he struggles to understand the essential nature of the multiverse and the part that he and his siblings have to play in it. The reader struggles along with him, as Broderick tries to shoehorn his model of the multiverse into the text. Universes of computronium, placed one inside the other like Russian dolls extend from the origin of the cosmos, or Omega Point. Dialogue, action and plot are subverted to the task of explaining Broderick's vision, to the extent that ultimately, any narrative tension is compromised. We get the feeling Broderick is simply trying to do too much.

Broderick's style in *Godplayers* is at once playful and poetic. He grounds August masterfully in the 'real world' before taking him to some of the most imaginative settings seen in recent years. The descriptions are evocative and compelling. August's own view of things is rich with a sense of humour that wrestles madly to stop the whole house of cards from toppling over. *Godplayers* is immensely enjoyable, and a massive achievement, if rendered unwieldy by the sheer mass of speculation it contains.



LORD BYRON'S NOVEL
JOHN CROWLEY
Morrow hb, 465pp, $25.95

Paul Kincaid writes: One never approaches a novel by John Crowley with works by other authors in mind. But the recreation of a novel by a historical character surely recalls *The Iron Heel*, Adolf Hitler's fantasy novel as concocted by Norman Spinrad; a work in which annotations by another hand shift the perspective has been employed in *Pale Fire* by Vladimir Nabokov and *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski; a story partly told in the exchange of emails by academics is a feature of *Ash* by Mary Gentle. But the moment you start reading *Lord Byron's Novel* all such comparisons fall away. He has managed to create out of seeming well-trodden territory a book that is, as ever with Crowley, *sui generis*.

Let us begin, as we must, with Lord Byron's novel itself. Without being an expert on Byron it is impossible to say how precise Crowley's ventriloquism is, but he has caught dashing high romanticism perfectly. This is pure Gothick, a highly coloured tale of zombies and doppelgangers, of gloomy Scottish castles and exotic foreign shores, of escapes from death, of lost loves, of dramatic reversals of fortune. Our hero, Ali, the Albanian bastard of an English milord who delights in his villainy, is falsely accused of his father's murder, rescued by smugglers, caught up in Wellington's war in Spain, returns to London high society, is tricked into a loveless marriage, pursued by a doppelganger, and finally after a duel is forced to flee to the continent. After Byron's death, the manuscript finds its way back to England and into the hands of his daughter, Ada Lovelace. She destroys it to suit the wishes of her mother, but only after encoding it in proto-computer code for Babbage's Analytical Engine. In the last weeks of her life, she also annotates the novel, notes which chart both her decline and her relationship with the father she was never allowed to know. Around this is an exchange of emails involving the researcher who discovers the papers, her lesbian lover who cracks the code, and her estranged father who edits the newly discovered novel. Her father is a once-renowned Byron scholar that she hasn't seen since he fled justice after raping a young girl, and in their rediscovered relationship the story of Byron and Ada is subtly mirrored and even more subtly resolved.

The best novel of the year. Yet, like all of Crowley's books over the last 20 years, it will probably not be published in the UK. Tragic!

TUMBLING AFTER
PAUL WHITCOVER
HarperCollins hb, 328pp, $24.95

THE WORLD BEFORE
KAREN TRAVISS
HarperCollins pb, $7.50

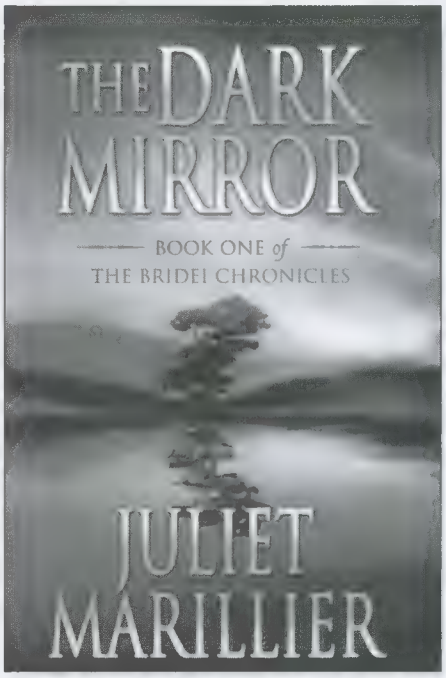
Farah Mendlesohn writes: Paul Whitcover's second novel *Tumbling After* is a very different kind of novel but it shares with all the books discussed here an awareness of the instability of the universe and the insistence that action bequeath consequences. Jack and Jilly are twins. On a summer day Jack drowns in the surf. Except that he doesn't. The world shifts and his arm is broken but he is alive. As the novel proceeds Jack watches the world shift at each crisis. As Jack and Jilly age over the summer, Jilly's growing maturity destabilises their interdependence. Both in the 'real world' and in the role playing game their uncle has invented, Jack retreats emotionally to the imposed arbitrariness of childhood while Jilly increasingly dominates here environment.

Whitcover uses metaphors of mutations and dice to sharpen the anxieties of adolescence in profoundly satisfying ways, and the layering of possible worlds intrigues, but aspects of the novel leave one restless. The relationship between Jack and Jilly ought to be profound yet it comes over as trite, the physical resonance between the two all too predictable, the sex an adolescent fantasy. The game doubling of the world, and the retreat of the protagonist into the game is becoming a cliché in the SF of adolescence. What should be an ambivalent ending feels like a get-out. Jack doesn't escape the consequences of his actions, but the reader does. *Tumbling After* is a beautifully written book, but one which in the end feels to secure in itself for its own plot.

Domination of one's environment shapes Karen Traviss's latest novel, *The World Before*. Traviss writes military SF, has lots of guns going off and her universe is full of aliens who regard humans with contempt. *City of Pearl* (2004) has been shortlisted for the Locus Best First Novel Award. But although Traviss is unlikely to ever be the wordsmith that Whitcover is, her work makes the same demand that humans face the world. Where humans in, say John Scalzi's *Old Man's War* (reviewed by Rick Kleffel in IZ197) assume a manifest destiny, anyone in Traviss's world who doesn't examine their own assumptions is going to end up dead. *City of Pearl* and its sequel *Crossing the Line* approached this on the individual level. By *The World Before* the entire human race is having second thoughts.

The story so far: Shan Frankland, environmental officer, has been sent to check out a colony at Cavanagh's Star. She finds humans confined to a compound by the wess'har who are there as protectors of the sea-bound bezeri. The wess'har are locked in a defensive conflict with the rapid-breeding isenj and there are also ussissi, a species that specialises as go-betweens. Shan Frankland, infected with an immortality inducing virus called c'nataat, has spaced herself rather than pass it on, leaving her wess'har lover Arras and her marine not-yet lover Ade, to try to survive as a family, while the wess'har have called on their cousins from the past to help them deal with the clearly utterly untrustworthy humans. I'm reminded of the ending of Ken MacLeod's *The Cassini Division* where one betrayal from a single Jovian faction was held to prove the Jovians utterly untrustworthy. Midway through *The World Before* this is how the wess'har regard humans.

Given the hard-assed tone of these books it's unexpected to find oneself grieving for the physical loneliness of the leper, or celebrating joyfully as love crosses gender and species assumptions. In the midst of a war Traviss takes time to think about alternative evolutions. The aliens all have societies and sexualities which are conditioned by their evolutionary development. Traviss – as she has in her earlier books – forces us to take a good long hard look at so called human 'morality', a lot of 'givens' leave the wess'har baffled or revolted. As one notes, "Their ability to close their eyes to what would happen to the world outside their heads constantly amazed her." But there is not a trace of mawkishness in Traviss's work, none of the aliens are nicer than us, they are just different. Seen through their eyes we feel rather small.



THE DARK MIRROR
JULIET MARILLIER
Tor UK hb, 556pp, £17.99

Sandy Auden writes: Over the last couple of years, Juliet Marillier has moved on from re-imagining fairy tales. These days, as *The Dark Mirror* ably illustrates, she's drawing her inspiration from historical settings and setting her adventures against a backdrop of realistic old cultures. Guy Gavriel Kay has long been producing excellent novels in this arena, but while Marillier's *Dark Mirror* tale has clearly been equally well-researched, it lacks the intricate structure of Kay's novels and Marillier settles for a simpler, standard romance format.

Mills and Boon *et al* have long exploited the approach of bringing two people together who don't realise how much they care for each other; to have their life together ripped apart – usually through a series of misunderstandings and events beyond their control – only to be reunited after a suitably anguished period of separation. It's a successful, if predictable, format and Marillier fills out this framework with a luscious amount of detail, both in historical landscape and through her characters.

The two protagonists are Bridei and Tuala. Bridei doesn't know about the royal blood that flows in his veins, and he's sent to grow up and be educated by a Mage in a different kingdom (another familiar story structure). Tuala is one of the fey, left as a baby on the doorstep of Bridei's new home.

She's reluctantly take in by the household and their shared destiny is sealed.

The development of Bridei's character is expertly drawn, as the Mage, Briochan, prepares him for the time he'll challenge for the throne. Tuala's journey as a non-human outsider and the often lonely development of her magical skills is engaging and heart-rending. Indeed, Marillier has always been highly skilled at creating sympathetic characters for the reader, then twisting the emotions once she's got you on board. And this time, she extends that skill to the supporting cast. They all have complex personalities and it's often these traits that produces the political infighting, murderous intentions and manipulative back-stabbings that form a major part of the second half of the book, when Bridei travels to the palace to take his place at court.

For all its simple structures, *Dark Mirror* still provides oodles of entertainment, a fascinating evocation of life in Pictish England – the pre-Roman culture in the British Isles that eventually became Scotland – and an emotional roller-coaster of a story. It leaves a sense of completion at the end of the volume, as well as allowing for future developments; and it delivers an intensely personal experience in the process. It's a trilogy with a lot of promise.

SOMEONE COMES TO TOWN, SOMEONE LEAVES TOWN
CORY DOCTOROW
Tor hb, 320pp, $24.95

Rick Kleffel writes: Best known for cyberpunk and science fiction, in *Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town*, Cory Doctorow offers readers something familiar and something fantastic. Alan is a middle-aged man who moves into a new house in a funky, artsy neighbourhood in Toronto. Next door, he has a house full of twenty-something art-punks. When Mimi, the Rubens-esque girl he takes fancy to reveals to him that she has wings, he handles the revelation with aplomb. After all, his father is a mountain and his mother is a washing machine. One of his brothers is an island, and another is a living set of three Russian nesting dolls. Two of them have just showed up on his doorstep, afraid that Davey, an unstable brother Alan and his other siblings killed years ago, has returned from the dead to continue terrorizing his family.

Doctorow handles the fantasy here so matter-of-factly, his writing verges on being hard-boiled. Neither he nor his characters dwell on the weirdness that comprises their lives. In fact, for all his fantastic (though not supernatural-seeming) woes, once Alan meets Kurt, the neighbourhood technopunk, he joins Kurt in a scheme to set up wireless Internet coverage for most of downtown Toronto. Entrepreneurs, the telephone company, street kids and stranger things still scheme and stalk one another on the not-so-gritty streets of a bohemian college town.

Like any of the best books you might find, *Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town* has to be read to be believed. And if you read it, you will believe it. Doctorow's prose is a great combination of straight-faced descriptions of strange things in close-up, touching character notes, humour and tension. Doctorow himself brings together these disparate elements in a seamless, slick style that never seems forced, weird, or nearly as odd some of what goes down. He stays on the right side of wisecracking, yet the smile will never leave your face.

The structure of the novel is rather complex, weaving back and forth in time as it tells the story of Alan's past and present in parallel. This can lead to some murky moments as time expands or contracts to suit the story. But the complex structure enhances the tension in both timelines, and makes the novel ultimately more compelling. The absurd fantasy is handled so matter-of-factly that it seems every bit as believable as hard-boiled anarcho-entrepreneurial scheming.

Ultimately, *Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town* unfolds its own wings and proves to be something of a romance, albeit a romance with a lot more plot than the usual boy-meets-girl. What's perhaps most remarkable here is that the story of the son of mountain who meets a girl with wings should seem so centred, so perfectly right-on-target, so utterly, prosaically believable. Readers will not feel that they've read a particularly strange or unusual novel until they try to describe it to others. Doctorow breaks the rules so gently, with such skill, that you don't know they're being broken until they've been reset into an entirely fresh and reasonable arrangement.

THE LIFE OF RILEY
ALEXANDER C. IRVINE
Subterranean Press hb, 140pp, $25

Rick Kleffel writes: All we know is all we're told. The how and the who of the telling are up to the author. Set some thirty years in the future, *The Life of Riley* melds science fiction and mystery in a unique fashion. Instead of following the story simply from beginning to end, *Maltese Falcon*-style, we see the same story from four different vantage points, *Rashomon*-style. It makes for dense, intense and intricate reading. It's like viewing each of the layers of a four-colour separation individually, and then putting the layers on top of one another to get the full colour picture; bracing, brainy, and occasionally frustrating. But the moment of revelation when the last word of the last layer unfolds offers an unparalleled reading pleasure.

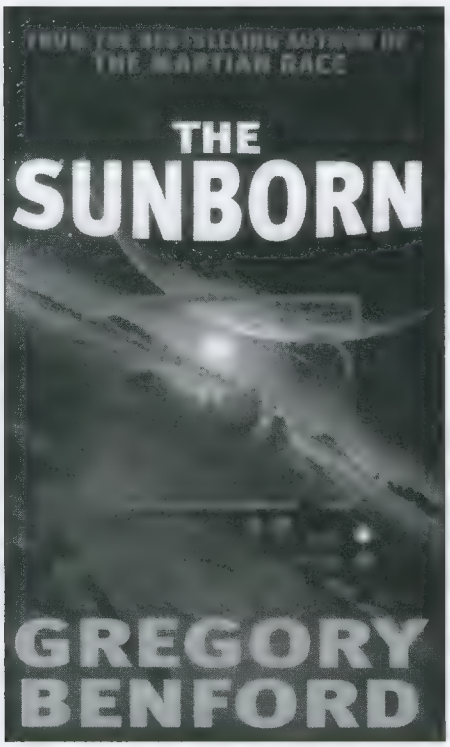
Irvine's future is a crazy-quilt patchwork of cluttered anarchy. Fundamentalist Christian religious groups have overrun the country, as well as some very humanoid aliens that humans call Bettys. The climate is a catastrophe, and poverty is the default. Gabriel Riley is part of the guard service protecting a tent city of refugees camped on the White House lawn. Did he shoot the protester? Why would the Bettys be involved? Better question: why are they here? Christian undergrounds, alien splinter factions, hallucinating mystics and apocalyptic consequences clash and counter one another. Is Gabriel Riley the saviour of the human race, or is he the key to bring about its downfall?

Irvine lets his story unfold from the vantage point of Riley's wife, Zena, a Betty that calls itself The Counsellor, a hallucinating Christian mystic named Truman Throckmorton, and Nate Drinkwater, an ordinary guy who finds himself in the middle of an arcane plot. Irvine writes in four very individual and unique voices. Each speaker brings a different understanding of what is happening, and adds to the story that precedes it, even when they contradict one another. Characters cross paths, but the paths don't converge. The plots intersect one another, but they don't join.

Occasionally, this technique succeeds only in frustrating the reader's attempts to comprehend, but as the book progresses the details begin to create fascinating interference patterns. Upon finishing the second portion, readers will want to reread the first and the

second. Upon reading the third section, the reader will want to reread the first three sections, and upon finishing the book, the reader will want to reread the whole shebang.

Whether they'll understand precisely what transpired is another matter entirely. *The Life of Riley* piles up contradictions, misunderstandings, lies, damn lies and politics into a pixelated vision of our future, and feeling trumps understanding. The real mystery here is how a novel so small on the outside can seem so much bigger on the inside. Irvine layers understanding and misunderstanding, lies and truths, alien and human, the large and the small. Slot them together, one on top of another, and shine your brightest light through the story. Every layer adds colour and complicates the picture. And in the end, you know much more than you were told.



THE SUNBORN
GREGORY BENFORD
Orbit pb, 424pp, £6.99

Darrell Schweitzer writes: This sequel to *The Martian Race* is not for the uninitiated, not merely because it's a sequel, but because it lacks much of what your friend who's never read science fiction before would recognise as story values. Julia and Viktor, protagonists of the previous book, now the most famous astronauts in the solar system, and valuable corporate assets, are still on Mars, attempting to do serious work while making banal commercials for the Consortium which finances space exploration. They aren't allowed to risk themselves, because stock prices might drop. About the time a yuppie bureaucrat suggests there might be a profit to be had in marketing Viktor's sperm back on Earth, the reader begins to think of *Gattica* or Douglas Adams or even Philip K. Dick. Much of the economic and political situation, as it impacts on the characters' lives, is potentially very funny, and might have been handled better as satire.

But, no, this is a Hard Science Novel and so, with stolid earnestness, much of the text is devoted to a tour of scientific wonders, in a manner not unfamiliar since the very beginnings of SF: a catalogue, complete with charts and diagrams, without much in the way of plot or character development. Some of the ideation is quite brilliant. Here you will encounter the most plausible speculations about possible extraterrestrial life within the solar system (on Mars and later on Pluto) found anywhere in science fiction. It would do Hal Clement proud. But, except for a couple nasty accidents, nothing much happens in any dramatic sense for pages and pages. We are waiting for the story to start. Eventually it does. Off Viktor and Julia go to Pluto, to unravel further scientific mysteries. More great ideas are expounded. But the pulse does not race.

It's worth examining why such a forward-looking novel seems, in many ways, so old-fashioned. Has science fiction dispensed with its future, as Judith Berman suggested in a celebrated essay, or have we, to borrow Jack Womack's phrase, put the future behind us? If science fiction as a form is not to die of suffocation up its own navel, it must continue to address the real, external world in terms of expanding scientific knowledge. Not post-modern word-play and metafiction, but the genuine article, fiction about something. It is to Benford's credit that his fiction is still about something. His aliens and his planets are the real deal.

DYING INSIDE
ROBERT SILVERBERG
Gollancz 'SF Masterworks' pb, 199pp, £6.99

Stephen Bromby writes: *Dying Inside*, first published in 1972, focuses on one of the classic staples of SF: telepathy. However, where Alfred Bester, whose template novel *The Demolished Man* focused on telepathy's impact on an entire society, Silverberg explores the ramifications of such power within one individual. David Selig is a man possessed with the power of God – he can read minds – supposedly the envy of many, but instead, he stumbles through life with neither a meaningful relationship nor job. Sidelined to spending his days ghostwriting college term papers, Selig ekes out a meagre existence, wallowing in self-depreciation, struggling to rejuvenate his failing telepathic abilities, all the while yearning for normality.

Selig is the prescient narrator of his own struggle, burdened with the knowledge that his ability to read minds is slowly waning. He is almost an outcast, defiantly estranged from his emotionally twisted sister, Judith, one of a few cognizant of his 'gift'. Their sibling rivalry ventures beyond the chastely domestic to the rigidly hostile. Silverberg paints Selig's hatred of Judith in primary, yet acrimonious colours, as Selig balances precariously between normality and total breakdown.

The story flashes back and forth across Selig's life, charting the peaks and valleys of his 'gift', ranging from his childhood experiences of mind-reading without consequence, his adolescent paranoia of being uncovered as a freak, to his stealthy decline into muted apathy as he reaches middle age. Selig's accounts of his telepathic contacts with other beings, human and animal, are fleeting, abrasive, and ultimately disastrous, as in his drug-fuelled connection with indifferent lover, Toni, the meld proving hazardous to their deceptively idyllic relationship. These invasions are hypnotic. Silverberg renders each encounter vividly, especially when the teenage Selig experiences sex with a friend, through the mind of a stranger. The psychic triangle is charged, explicit – voyeurism with orgasmic aftereffects.

While written in an acute miasma of graphic imagery and oft-lyrical passion, *Dying Inside* feels dated, with references to the sixties and seventies bohemia of New York, and the slick register of Selig's Jewish pariah reflecting the hip-cool panache of the era. Silverberg recites Selig's inevitable slide into anonymity with cool confidence, juxtaposing the decades with moments of stark cruelty (Selig is attacked in a sharp reversal of racial hatred) and poetical realisation, as Selig finally accepts his fate in an eternal silence.



SPIN
ROBERT CHARLES WILSON
Tor hb, 364pp, $25.95

Rick Kleffel writes: "Overhead, without any fuss, the stars were going out." The concluding sentence to Sir Arthur C. Clarke's short story 'The Nine Billion Names of God' is surely one of the most memorable in science fiction, capturing the quiet, inevitable feel of an impending apocalypse already in progress. *Spin*, the latest and most powerful novel by Robert Charles Wilson, begins with this fetching image and follows it with a finely written novel of character and speculation. Beautifully crafted on all levels, *Spin* is one of those novels that you should probably buy two copies of – one to read and one to loan to your friends. And you'll be wanting to do so before you've even finished the novel. Even without the speculative elements, *Spin* is simply a great novel. But Wilson has cooked up the kind of imaginative leaps that draw readers to science fiction in the first place. Your sense of wonder need not be accompanied by a PhD to enjoy this.

At heart, *Spin* is the tale of a family that is both over-clocked and undermined, told by the outsider who never quite manages to make the connections he wishes for. The Lawtons own the Big House, a mansion big enough to house the driven but not brilliant patriarch, E.D. Tyler Dupree lives in the small house with his mother, the housekeeper, but is allowed to form a friendship with E.D.'s kids, Jason and Diane. Jason is brilliant but easily moulded by his dynamic father. His sister Diane is smart, but she's not in Jason's or E.D.'s league; unfortunately, she's not in Tyler's either, for entirely different reasons. E.D.'s wife Carol is a one-time doctor who is disappearing into a haze of alcoholism. She's barely even fazed by the disappearance of the stars in the night sky, the phenomenon that comes to be known as the Spin.

Wilson's invention here is every bit as brilliant as those of his characters, and frankly, the less said about it the better for the reader. I'd go so far as to recommend ignoring the dust jacket and plunging directly into Wilson's world. He's got lots of surprises for science fiction readers, the kind of 'wish I had thought of that' ideas that are the result of lots of research and lots of imagination. But every revelation – and there are plenty of them, lasting right up until the final pages of the novel – is something that's a big idea yet easy to comprehend. Wilson has the sense of wonder down so well that while reading *Spin*, which seems entirely contemporary in every sense, you will feel as if you're back in the heyday of the first great SF novels. The comparisons become obvious once you read the novel, and I won't spoil your enjoyment by pointing them out. But *Spin* engenders these comparisons because it feels every bit as real, as new and as exciting as the classics did in their day.

In the end, *Spin* is a novel that addresses the classic science fiction theme of transcendence with elegance, intelligence and imagination. We all seek to achieve a state beyond the day-to-day lives that we must endure. Some look within and others without, and both directions lead back to one another and then somewhere else entirely. Wilson captures this complex paradox of our lives as we live them and wish to live them. He captures the rush towards tomorrow without having to rush. One hopes upon closing the covers that *Spin* might achieve the kind of gravity, the escape velocity to slip between the boundaries that separate genre fiction from a world that needs books like this. A world that is moving swifter than it knows into a future that we are creating without knowing a single thing. Certain only that we know less than we need to, but more than we should. If in avoiding apocalypse we achieve transcendence, our next state of being will be no more certain than the world we know now. We can live in a constant state of wonder, even if the stars continue to shine in the night sky.

BAD MAGIC
STEPHAN ZIELINSKI
Tor hb, 251pp, $23.95

Rick Kleffel writes: "We live on a placid island of ignorance," H.P. Lovecraft told us. Well, placid for some. The premise of *Bad Magic* is utterly familiar. We're surrounded by magic that most of us can't see, and our lives are better for it. Those who can see the magic – well, that's where Zielinski flees from the familiar and etches out his own vision. The eight main characters who fight and curse their way through the novel are a high-octane, volatile bunch of barely-sane, jargon-spouting know-it-alls, but all they know pretty much contradicts all you know. Overhearing their motor-mouth shop talk is like eavesdropping on a gang of street thugs. You'll find yourself privy to secrets that scrape away at your comfort level until it gutters out in a blaze of unreal violence. *Bad Magic* is the supernatural equivalent of one of those uncomfortably realistic life-on-the-mean-streets noirs.

As *Bad Magic* opens, the San Francisco cell for the Opposition is attacked by 'thin dogs', vicious and powerful canine creatures. Two of their number are taken down, and the rest of the Bay Area, perhaps even the West Coast, might follow. Reluctantly led by Al Ryder, the cell finds itself pitted against the Vulture cult, vampires, and vengeful ex-lovers. And even though some of the members have degrees in what they're doing, fighting the many forms of evil out there is definitely a learn-as-you-go proposition. Every case they face offers challenges. Every mistake they make – and they make plenty – might be their last.

Zielinski favours a dialogue-heavy approach that will seem familiar in form though not in content for readers of hard-boiled, gritty street mysteries. He sets the bar pretty high with his large cast of characters who are too raw to be quirky. He eschews easy introductions for overheard snippets of conversations that take place while the characters try to keep bodies and minds from being ripped to shreds. Al Rider is a thaumaturge, Maggie Sue Percy a fire-breathing flying witch, Pericles Whitlomb a scholar, Joe Washington a three-foot eight-inch black magician with ties to Haiti, Chloe Lee a Geoduck clam totem member, Max Sturgeon an ass-kicker, Kristof Arbeiter a German magician and Theibaud Creedon the supernatural equivalent of a very adept CIA assassin. On the streets of San Francisco, they're the only thing between the seething,

ignorant masses and seething, ignorant evil. Sometimes, it seems, the cell members might have some trouble distinguishing between the two. If you're one of those readers who likes a 'this is what we're doing and why we're doing it' speech shortly before the end of the book, you're going to be disappointed and annoyed. *Bad Magic* is a foreign movie from a supernatural world without the subtitles, all show, no tell.

No tell except, that is, for a very funny twenty-page treatise on the 'San Diego zombie' that concludes the book. Here's a book that will without doubt change your perception of those leathery, tanned folks you see the next time you visit the beach. You may not be happy with the change, but be glad that Zielinski is only willing to open your third eye just enough to let in a *glimpse* of evil.

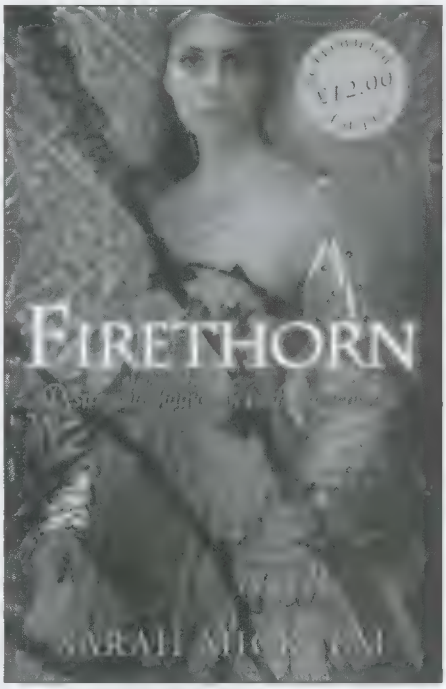
FIRETHORN
SARAH MICKLEM
Voyager hb, 383pp, £12.99

Stephanie Burgis writes: *Firethorn* is the first book in a high-fantasy trilogy which takes the trope of medieval warfare and explodes it. Near the end of the novel, while sitting in an army camp and waiting for battle, Firethorn, the heroine, wonders at her own earlier naivety. But there is also grime and dirt, and in a medieval culture based on rigid social divisions, Firethorn's own adventures are the sort that will never be stitched onto a tapestry or turned into a heroic ballad.

Firethorn is the lowest of the low, a woman of the oppressed native people, the Mudfolk, whose language and beliefs were taken away by the ruling class, the Blood, when they invaded hundreds of years ago. Her situation turns perilous when she falls in love with a nobleman of the Blood and agrees to follow him to war as his Sheath, or mistress. If Sire Galan tires of her, she will be cast aside without protection or resources, in an army full of men who consider her easy prey.

As the king's army prepares for war and the men practise at lethal tournaments and dream of glory, Firethorn stubbornly fights for love, independence and the respect of her aristocratic lover. Micklem's characterisation is spot-on, and the relationship that develops between Firethorn and Galan is brutally true. The love that binds them is real and powerful, but it is not a love that can be equal in any fashion. Buried in this engaging story is a sharp critique of the way that hierarchies of class and gender pollute human relationships. Danger lurks in every corner for Firethorn: in the disapproval of Galan's noble friends, in the continual threat of rape or other violence by the men in the camp and in the treacherous guidance of a god, Ardor, who has a purpose for her which she fears and cannot understand.

Micklem's use of language is precise and vivid, placing us immediately in her world. Firethorn is a fiercely lovable heroine, all the more sympathetic for being flawed and fallible. This is an astonishing first novel, and a fine beginning to a trilogy.





COLLECTIONS

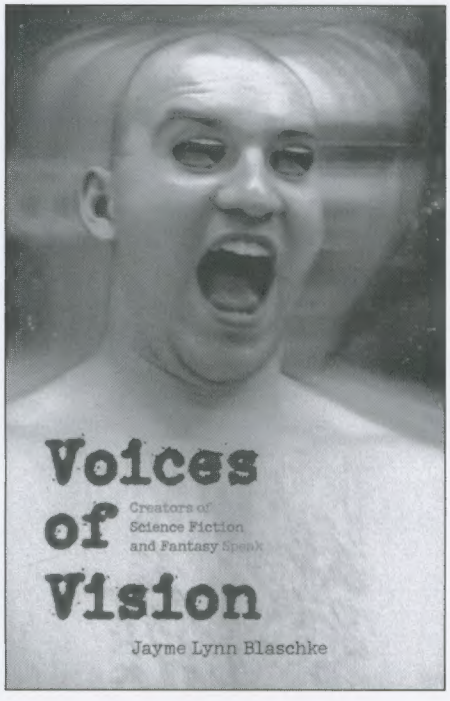
THE EMPEROR OF GONDWANALAND & OTHER STORIES
PAUL DI FILIPPO
Thunder's Mouth Press pb, 370pp, $16.95

Graham Sleight writes: In one of his notes in *The Emperor of Gondwanaland & Other Stories*, Paul Di Filippo mentions Archilo-chus's adage about the hedgehog and the fox: that the fox knows many small things and the hedgehog knows one big thing. Di Filippo is a self-diagnosed fox, scampering from subject to subject as the whim takes him.

So the 18 stories in this collection (several from *Interzone*) are as varied as you could imagine. There's Melville-derived SF in the opening 'Anselmo Merino', riffs on Puss-in-Boots in 'Ailoura', alternate histories, various surreal blasphemies (including a retelling of the life of the Virgin Mary of which Pope Benedict XVI might well not approve), collaborations with Barry Malzberg and Don Webb, and some of Di Filippo's patented biotech wonkiness. The stories almost all read quickly and smoothly, and are packed full of sex and jokes and the genre's pulpy heritage. If there's something lacking, it's maybe a sense that Di Filippo is willing to push himself beyond the first-order pleasures of the story in hand.

In 'Bare Market', for instance, the protagonist's climactic sex with the wired-to-the-world-economy Adamina causes her brain, and therefore the market, to briefly implode, and leads to half a million deaths. It's not that it's not a good sex scene – for my money, it's the funniest since *The Tall Guy* – but is the protagonist really so self-absorbed to just shut himself away afterwards and wonder whether he can show his face again? Wouldn't he have been hauled up on trial, or sued into tiny pieces? But some of the stories cut deeper: 'Shake it to the West' reads like Howard Waldrop when he's having fun, 'Pulp Alibis' is unremittingly savage about O.J. Simpson, and the title story rather touchingly gives a Di Filippo regular-guy protagonist a dream of utopia. It's a very mixed mixed bag, then, but you wouldn't expect anything less; and this is a big and generous collection.

NON-FICTION



VOICES OF VISION
JAYME LYNN BLASCHKE
Bison Books pb, 194pp, $14.95

Steven H. Silver writes: Over a five year period, Jayme Lynn Blaschke conducted interviews with numerous authors and editors. Published in a variety of locations on the web and in print magazines (including *Interzone*), seventeen of these interviews have been collected into the book *Voices of Vision*, which provides a snapshot of the state of science fiction and comic books at the turn of the millennium.

Beginning with the editors of *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *Science Fiction Age*, Blaschke demonstrates that he is an insightful interviewer who is interested in asking more than just basic, run of the mill questions. The results, in the editorial interviews as well as the auctorial interviews, means he is able to shed light on what science fiction is and can be.

Not only does he include interviews with some of the grandmasters of the field, Blaschke also interviewed a variety of up and coming authors, thereby providing a wide range of point of view as authors reflect on their careers and the fields from different perspectives. Of necessity, authors who are just starting out, like Patricia Anthony, will view the field very differently than longtime authors like Jack Williamson. Similarly, a comic book author and a science fiction author, while sharing some of the same concerns, will diverge in other areas.

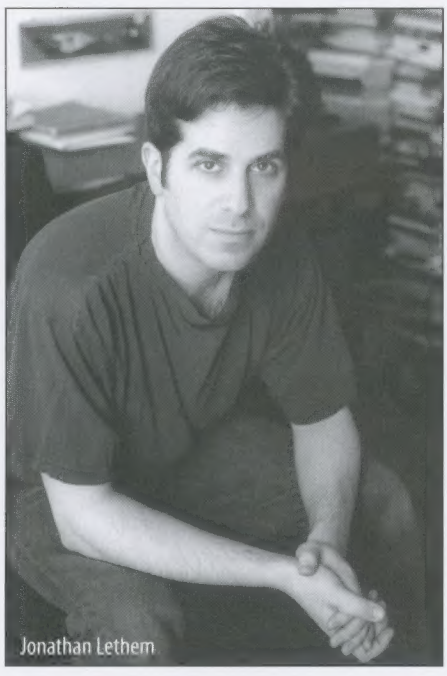
The only real quibble with *Voices of Vision* is that Blaschke was unable to either conduct follow-up interviews closer to the time of the book's publication or provide information about how the authors' and editors' careers have changed in the years since he spoke with them.

Blaschke's interviews and their subjects are interesting and, while relatively brief in length, cover a tremendous amount of ground. *Voices of Visions* is essential for understanding the current state of science fiction from the point of view of those who write it and publish it.

THE DISAPPOINTMENT ARTIST
JONATHAN LETHEM
Doubleday Books hb, 149pp, $22.95

Steven H. Silver writes: While Jonathan Lethem is best known for his novels *Amnesia Moon*, *Motherless Brooklyn* and *Fortress of Solitude*, he has also carved out a niche writing essays. His collection *The Disappointment Artist* is a collection of nine autobiographical essays which reveal much more about Lethem as a human and an artist than his novels do.

Influences on Lethem's writing style about, from films to music to other authors. When *Gun, With Occasional Music* was first published, Lethem was often compared to Philip K. Dick, and sure enough, in 'You Don't Know Dick', Lethem ruminates on his reading of Dick's works. Other essays on writers don't work as well, perhaps because Edward Dahlberg, the topic of the titular essay, isn't as widely read now as he once was.


Jonathan Lethem

In the way of films, George Lucas, John Wayne and John Cassavetes each have their turn on centre stage. Lethem opens with a spirited defence of the John Wayne/John Ford film *The Searchers*, which formed the basis for his novel *Girl in Landscape*. Lethem's relationship with the film is somewhat ambivalent, leaving the reader wondering why Lethem chose to base a novel on the film. A youthful love affair with *Star Wars* would have us believe that while he saw the film twenty-one times in its first summer, he has never watched the film since then.

His essays on music and painting provide similar looks at the works which influenced Lethem as both a person and as an artist. Perhaps because Lethem's voice is so familiar as a purveyor of fiction, however, it is never clear how much of these personal essays are truth and how much are fictionalised versions of what really happened. In the end, it doesn't really matter as the essays are entertaining and provide insight into the persona that Lethem wishes to advance to his readership.

TRANSFORMATIONS: THE STORY OF THE SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINES, VOLUME TWO 1950–1970
MIKE ASHLEY
Liverpool University Press, 419pp, £50 hb, £20 pb

Jim Steel writes: The golden age of science fiction? There is a convincing case for the early fifties. Maturity in both themes and literary ability was now widely apparent and the magazine explosion was perfectly timed to showcase this. 1953 saw thirty-seven different SF magazines in America alone, with *Galaxy* and *Fantasy & Science Fiction* leading the way in quality and several others not far behind. Of course, there was much that wasn't so good and if Ashley has a fault, then it is praising some of the journeymen too highly; quite frankly, writers such as J.T. McIntosh haven't aged at all well. But then, when he rates a Reginald Brown story as "another appalling story, ranking among the worst in SF" as an example from one British

magazine, the mind reels. The flooding of the market with such trash (and, unfortunately, British publishers were leading offenders) was one of the contributing factors that led to the inevitable crash in the late '50s.

Ashley neatly weaves the parallel strands of British and American publishing together as he traces the story through the decades, and Britain largely redeems herself with the New Worlds-led new wave of the mid-sixties. Ironically (but tidily), he finishes just before the story of his own book starts. In 1974, *SF Monthly* ran a series of articles by Ashley on the history of SF magazines and the same publisher then hobbled expanded versions by using them as introductions to weak anthologies. Three decades of further research, including material on the beginning of the SF publishing industry (there is no clear dividing line between magazines and books), have removed any need for padding. Indeed, perhaps because of being faced with the problem of where to stop, there is no fiction quoted anywhere in here.

Although not intended as such, this book is a valuable history of the genre for the years concerned. As well as covering the editors (a mixed collection of heroes, charlatans and madmen), there are brief biographies of relevant writers and very comprehensive appendixes, making this pretty much essential for anyone with an interest in science fiction. Pity the late Andre Norton, though: through all of this, an editor sat on one of her serials for thirty-five years and then only managed to publish the first two sections.

SUBTERRANEAN WORLDS: A CRITICAL ANTHOLOGY
PETER FITTING, EDITOR
Wesleyan University Press hb, $29.95

Paul Kincaid writes: Science fiction is not one simple, unified form. It is actually made up of a myriad of strands of themes and ideas and approaches that interweave with each other in a potentially infinite number of combinations. We recognise the more substantial themes that go into the mix – utopias, aliens, space travel and the like – but some can be all too easily forgotten even though they have generated a considerable body of work. One such is the subject of this curious book.

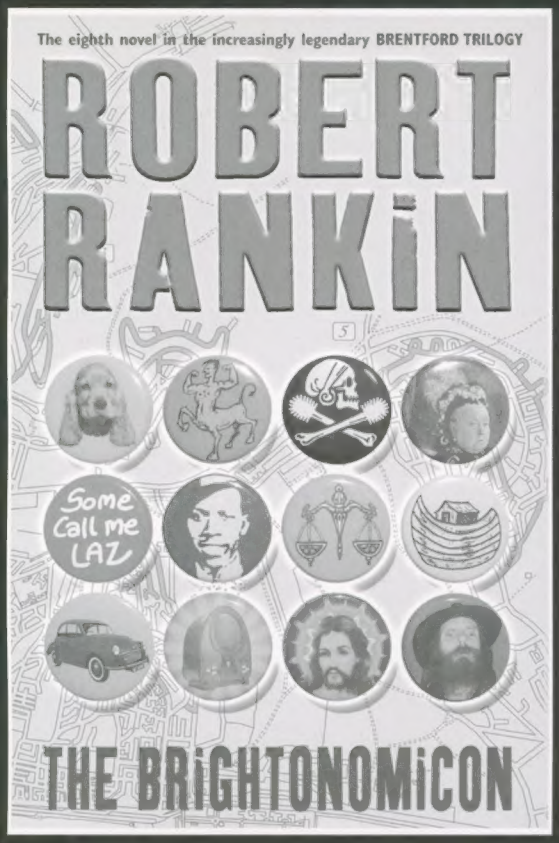
In ancient times the dead journeyed underground to their afterlife in Hades, and this was an idea the Christian church adopted in its notion of Hell. The most famous literary representation of Hell is Dante's *Inferno* which takes its narrator through successive rings of Hell, each deeper than the last. This pit of damnation has had such a strong grip on the European imagination that it is impossible to avoid finding echoes of it in H.G. Wells's Morlocks, in the fascist realm of Joseph O'Neill's *Land Under England*, in the post-nuclear torments of Harlan Ellison's 'I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream', and on and on and on in the representations of the dark and buried worlds of more science fiction than we might casually imagine. And yet neither Dante nor the afterlife feature in this critical survey of the theme.

For Fitting, subterranean realms enter science fiction through a seventeenth century scientific notion propounded most notably by Edmund Halley. Seeking to explain some observed perturbations in the Earth's magnetic field, Halley proposed that there was another world nested within our own. It wasn't much of a theory and it was pretty soon discredited, except for an American nutcase called John Cleves Symmes who, in the early years of the nineteenth century, petitioned the American government and just about every scientific body in the world to fund an expedition that would prove there was a great hole at the poles, a hole that would prove the entrance to not one but seven inner worlds. From this, Fitting draws together a series of works from the early 18th century to the early 20th century which are based on the idea of this inner world. Each chapter of this book consists of a critical introduction followed by a number of extracts from the work in question. Some of these extracts are a page or two long, most are little more than a paragraph. These extracts illuminate some key idea, usually the journey to the inner world, the peoples found there, and sometimes the journey back. On more than one occasion Fitting quotes a sentence or two in his critical introduction, a footnote a longer passage to provide context, and then when we turn to the extracts we find the same passage yet again; a measure not of carelessness, I suspect, but of a sort of over-careful pedantry which should have been sorted out by the attention to detail one would normally expect of a university press.

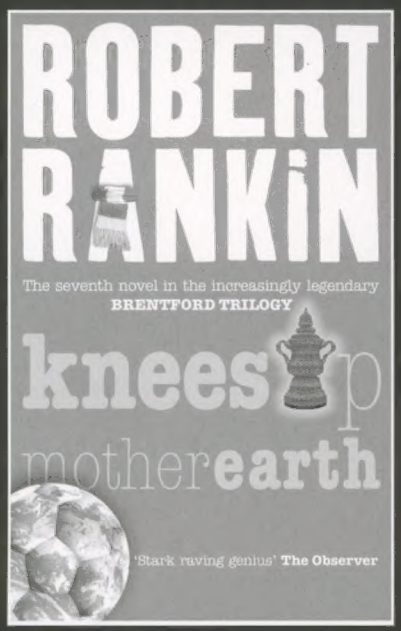
Ranging from the anonymous *Relation d'un voyage du Pôle Arctique au Pôle Antarctique* of 1721 to *At the Earth's Core* by Edgar Rice Burroughs (1914), there are stories of realms on the underside of our Earth's crust (like a sort of subterranean *Orbitsville*) or on interior globes; there are voyagers who travel through the gateway at the poles or through volcanoes; there are utopias and comic dystopias and simple adventure stories (and *Symzonia*, attributed to John Seaborn [1820], seems to have been a fictional attempt to justify the mad theories of John Cleves Symmes). There are novels that are still in print (the Burroughs, Jules Verne's *Voyage au centre de la terre* [1864], Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym' [1838]) and to be honest what is said here doesn't add much to our understanding or appreciation of them. There are others which have played an important part in the history of the genre but are less well known today (*The Journey of Niels Klim* by Ludvig Holberg [1741], Robert Paltock's *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins* [1750], *The Coming Race* by Edward Bulwer-Lytton [1871]), and here Fitting makes a much more valuable contribution to our understanding. And there are works which have been deservedly forgotten – Casanova thought that if he was to be remembered, it would be for *The Icosameron* (1788), the extracts here demonstrate why he was mistaken. But there are curiosities here, too: stories which Fitting admits don't belong here and which are included simply because they were classified as subterranean in Charles-Georges-Thomas Garnier's 36-volume *Voyages imaginaries* of 1787–9, one must wonder why he did not omit them in favour of more relevant works. Poe's story ends when the traveller reaches the entrance to the underworld, and so in context is interesting mostly for the works that have spun off from it, by Steve Utley and Howard Waldrop, and by Rudy Rucker, though these fall outside Fitting's time scale and are not discussed. And there is no mention at all for the most famous of all underground adventures, *Alice in Wonderland*, which would have at least provided an interesting contrast to the rest of this collection.

For anyone interested in the early history of the genre, this is an invaluable collection. You will find insights here into works that are probably not even mentioned in most conventional histories of science fiction. But it is a frustrating collection nonetheless, leaving one convinced that it could have been a great deal more.

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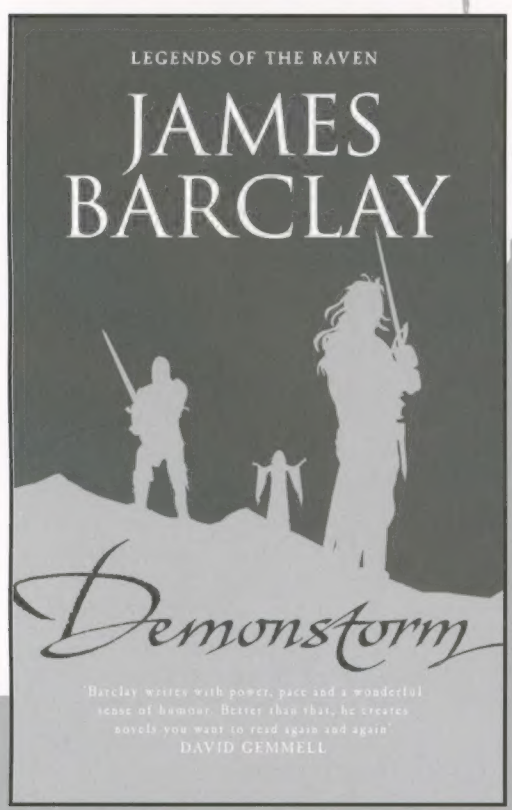


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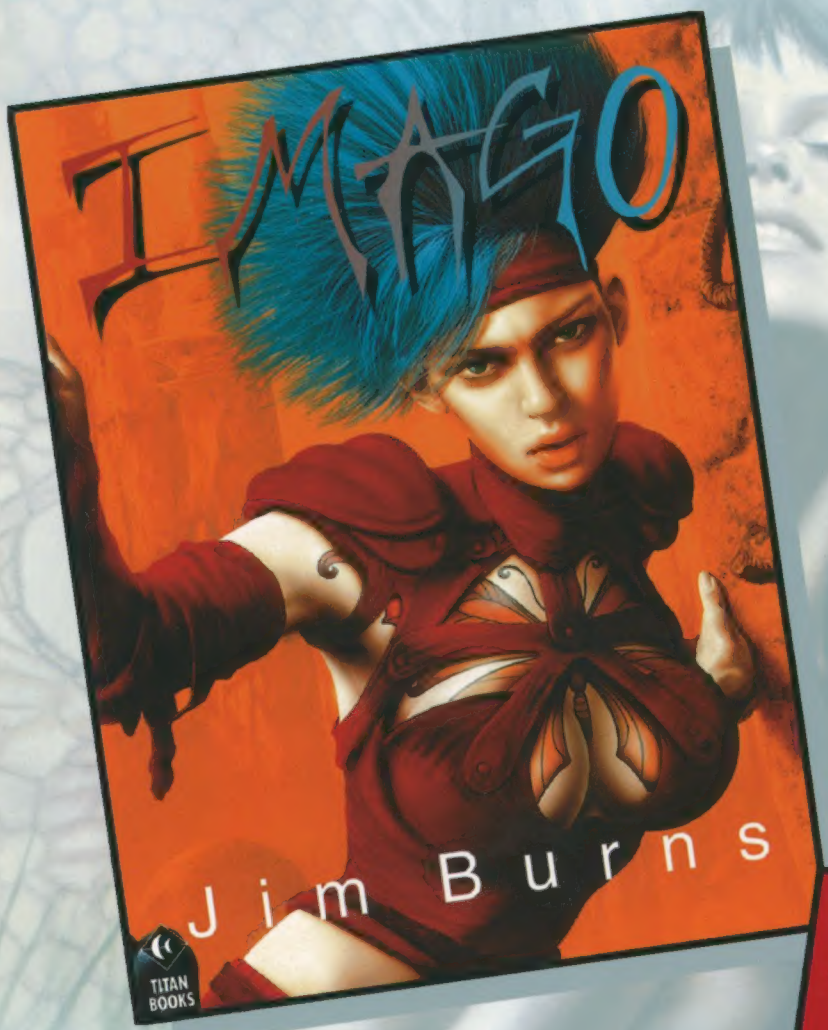
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